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women in the Arab  
region

**Advancing the  
care economy**

**Case study:  
Childcare in the  
Kingdom of Saudi  
Arabia**



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# Key messages

1

Since the Saudi Vision 2030 was announced, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has achieved marked progress in economic empowerment of women, by enhancing human and social development through legal and policy frameworks that support female employment, promoting family-friendly workplaces, and establishing childcare as a societal responsibility.

2

Historically, pre-school childcare took the form of kindergartens that fell short of addressing the need for a safe environment for children of working women throughout working hours.

3

The five years since the launch of the Vision have been marked by profound changes in rules and regulations, culminating in new regulatory frameworks and institutional reforms aimed at eliminating obstacles to participation of women in the labour force, with the creation of the child hospitality sector crucially addressing the major constraint of childcare.

4

The emerging child hospitality sector would benefit from improving leave regulations, particularly maternity, paternity and parental leaves; promoting establishment of child hospitality centres and streamlining attendant procedures; and reviewing implementation and delivery of flexible work initiatives.

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# Introduction

## Background

Over the last decade, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has achieved considerable progress in female employment, and in removing obstacles to participation of women in the labour force.

For long, female employment remained primarily concentrated in public education followed by health; in 2010, 84 per cent of working women worked in the former and 4.7 per cent in the latter.<sup>1</sup> However, it soon became apparent that the saturated public education sector is unable to provide employment for the increasing numbers of female graduates seeking jobs, leading to a steep increase in female unemployment from 15.8 per cent in 1999 to 35.7 per cent in 2012, compared with 6 per cent and 8 per cent respectively for males.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, high unemployment rates, particularly their steep rise for women, impelled policymakers to introduce numerous labour-market reforms. In 2003, the Council of Ministers issued resolution 63 easing restrictions on female employment and opening up new fields of work for women in both the public and private

sectors. A most significant provision established a permanent women's affairs committee, tasked with studying female employment issues. To overcome prevalent convictions that the government should be the principal employer of women and that female work needs to be in female-only workspaces, several Council of Ministers resolutions followed. These expanded job opportunities and fields of work for women by feminising certain sectors, i.e., decreeing them female only, as well as by allowing women to work in previously male-only occupations.

Nonetheless, female unemployment rates kept climbing, ranging between from 31 to 35 per cent, until the last quarter of 2020 when they dropped to 24.4 per cent.<sup>3</sup> The private sector in particular remained less accommodating to women due to fierce competition from cheaper non-Saudi male labour, but also, and more importantly, due to unfavourable working conditions for women, particularly in relation to transportation and childcare.<sup>4</sup>

Persistently high female unemployment rates thus called for addressing both regulatory and cultural challenges boldly; a task

1 حافظ، طلعت زكي (7 نيسان/ أبريل 2011)، معوقات عمل المرأة في السعودية والحلول، جريدة الاقتصادية.

2 جريدة الرياض (29 كانون الثاني/ يناير 2013)، معدل البطالة بين الذكور السعوديين الأقل على مدى 13 عاماً.

3 General Statistics Authority. Labour Market Statistics.

4 Al Sharif, 2019. Al-Madina Newspaper. Based on findings of a study conducted by the Labour Market Committee of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce that refers to transportation and childcare as constraints on participation of Saudi women in the labour force in the private sector.

undertaken admirably by the large-scale reform programme envisaged by the Saudi Vision 2030. The five years since the launch of the Vision have been marked by profound changes in rules and regulations, epitomised by emergence of new regulatory frameworks and institutional reforms aimed at eliminating obstacles to participation of women in the labour force, with the creation of the child hospitality sector crucially addressing the major constraint of childcare.

This case study, by the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA), in collaboration with Family Affairs Council of the Kingdom, focuses on economic participation of women and the measures taken to address it, with emphasis on the child hospitality sector that emerged in response to the need for childcare while women are at work. The study seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of: characteristics of the childcare economy in the country, its major stakeholders, changes over the last decade and during the COVID-19 pandemic, needs and expectations of families, and the broader policy environment framing public and private provision of care.

## Analytical framework

In 2015, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) issued a technical note proposing a co-responsibility for childcare

model (figure),<sup>5</sup> premised on the state supporting universal access to childcare, creating an enabling policy environment for employment of women, and promoting equity in childcare provisioning; employers implementing family-friendly workplace policies to ease work-family conflicts; childcare centres having quality features, including affordability, access, convenience, professional standards, caregiver training, decent conditions of work and holistic child development; and parents and families engaging in co-parenting.

This model is aligned with the framework proposed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) to advance care policies to recognize, reduce unpaid care work and redistribute it among the State and family members.

The 5R framework<sup>6</sup> seeks to lessen the burden of unpaid care work on women to free their time and encourage their participation in the labour markets. This study follows the UNICEF model as it takes into consideration unpaid care work provided to children while stressing the importance of early childhood care and education for the development and fulfilment of their capacities.

This case study draws upon the key elements of this model to address the following key questions with reference to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

- What kind of regulatory environment governs the childcare sector?

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, 2015. Achieving women's economic empowerment and early childhood care and development as mutually reinforcing objectives: Towards an integrated vision of early childcare programming.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_633166.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_633166.pdf).

- Who are the major stakeholders?
- What are the main characteristics of child hospitality centres?
- What expectations do mothers and families have, and to what extent does the child hospitality sector respond to their needs and expectations?
- How did the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures impact childcare provision and consequently parents and families?

**Key informant interviews** conducted with representatives of key government bodies and stakeholders influencing policy making.

**Focus group discussions** conducted with female investors in and owners of child hospitality centres.

**Online survey** of mothers of children enrolled in child hospitality centres; total number of responses received = 98.

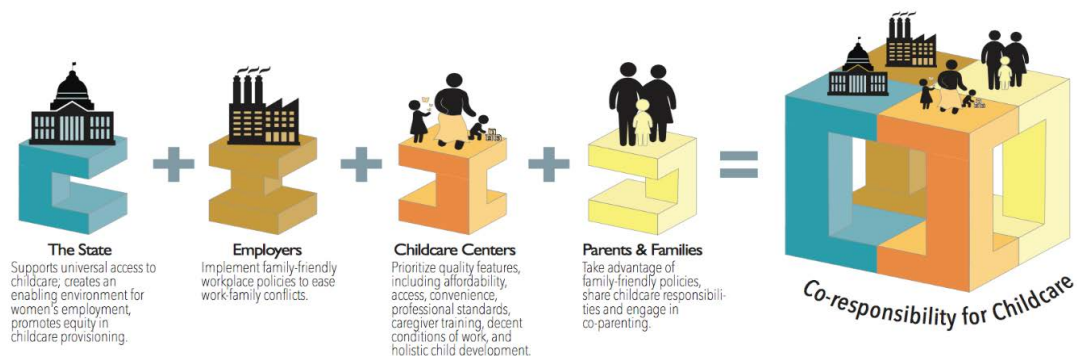
## Research methodology

A mixed-methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative tools for data collection is adopted:

**Desk Review included:** a thorough review of national, regional and international literature on childcare and issues of participation of women in the labour force, as well as an in-depth review of the Saudi Labour Law and other pertinent legislative texts.

## Research gaps and constraints

A questionnaire distributed through Google Forum to a number of child hospitality centres to forward to relevant mothers through WhatsApp proved a failure despite repeated attempts. A service provider was subsequently used to distribute the questionnaire directly to mothers, but even then, only 98 responses were received. This sample is too small for effective analysis and may not reflect reality fully, but nonetheless provides some insight into perceptions, needs and expectations of mothers vis-à-vis child hospitality.







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# 01

## Role of State in childcare

The conceptual framework adopted for this case study suggests that States can play an essential role in economic empowerment of women, while enhancing socialisation through legal and policy frameworks that support female employment, promote family-friendly workplaces, and ensure equal access to quality childcare and child benefits; thus helping resolve work-family conflicts facing working women and introducing childcare as a societal responsibility.

Various international conventions have addressed state responsibility in ensuring a proper work-life balance. For instance, article 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) addresses the need for childcare facilities and maternity leave, and article 18 (3) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) calls upon states parties to take all “appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare services and facilities for which they are eligible”.<sup>7</sup>

Benchmarks for a legal and policy framework for maternity protection and childcare can also be found in the following ILO Conventions:

- Convention No. 111: Convention concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation (1958), which, while not specifically referring to pregnancy and maternity, calls for equality of employment opportunity for men and women.
- Convention No. 156: Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention

(1981), which recognises the need for a change in the traditional roles of men and women in society and calls on member States to put in place policies that better enable both men and women with family responsibilities to prepare for, enter, advance, and remain in employment.

- Convention No. 183 – Maternity Protection Convention (2000), which is the most up-to-date standard on maternity protection, calling on member States to adopt appropriate measures to prevent discrimination in employment, specifically on the grounds of maternity, for all women in both the formal and informal economies.

Moreover, the ILO Social Security Convention No. 102 (1952) also recognises maternity insurance as an essential component of social security.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has ratified CEDAW and ILO Convention No. 111, but not yet ILO Conventions 156 and 183.

<sup>7</sup> Goonesekere, S. & De Silve-De Alwis, R., 2005. Women's and children's rights in a human rights based approach to development, UNICEF.

## A. Policy and legal framework

### 1. Saudi Vision 2030

In 2016, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia promulgated the Saudi Vision 2030 envisioning: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. As part of the quest for a thriving economy, the Vision envisages high employment rates, with equal employment opportunities for all resulting in an increase in participation of women in the workforce (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016). Several reforms were initiated securing for women the right, on equal footing with men, to obtain a passport and travel abroad; allowing women to drive cars; introducing amendments to civil status laws to guarantee women their rights; outlawing discrimination against women in employment; bringing the retirement age of women in line with that of men; allowing women to pursue work in a variety of new fields; disallowing discrimination in access to credit; guaranteeing employment protection for women during pregnancy and throughout maternity leave; and encouraging and supporting women in taking up leadership positions.<sup>8</sup>

The regulatory changes were accompanied by measures to empower women economically and increase their participation in the workforce. Through its various affiliated agencies and funds, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development launched to this end

a number of projects, initiatives and programmes, including Saudization of the child hospitality sector, as well as the Qurrah programme, which provides a unified portal connecting child hospitality centres with parents and financially supports enrolment of children in these centres.

### 2. Labour market policies

#### a) Maternity leave and breastfeeding

The most recent maternity protection convention, the ILO Maternity Protection Convention 183 (2000), calls upon members states to:

- Provide mothers with a period of maternity leave of no less than 14 weeks (with a recommendation to increase this period to at least 18 weeks),<sup>9</sup> including a period of compulsory leave after childbirth of 6 weeks.<sup>10</sup>
- Entitle women who are absent from work on maternity leave to a cash benefit of no less than two-thirds of their previous earning or a comparable amount.
- Entitle women to additional leave in case of health issues or complications resulting from pregnancy or childbirth.
- Provide workplace support for breastfeeding in the form of one or more daily breaks or daily reduction of hours of work.<sup>11</sup>
- Ensure health protection of pregnant and nursing working

8  
المدينة (19 تموز/يوليو 2020). «التحول الوطني» يرفع مشاركة السعوديات في سوق العمل إلى 26 في المائة.

9  
ILO, 2000. Maternity Protection Recommendation.

10  
Ibid.

11  
Ibid.

women by giving them the right not to perform work harmful to their health or that of their child.

- Provide strong employment and non-discrimination protection related to maternity.

Article 151 of Saudi Labour Law stipulates that:

- The female employee is entitled to 10 weeks of maternity leave, fully paid by the employer, which can be distributed as she likes. Maternity leave can be initiated by the employee within a maximum of four weeks prior to her due date, without this affecting in any way her annual paid leave.
- It is prohibited to request a female employee to work within the six weeks that follow birth giving.
- A female employee on maternity leave has the right to extend the leave period by one additional unpaid month.
- A female employee who gives birth to a sick child or to a child with special needs requiring permanent care shall be entitled to an additional month of paid maternity leave and may extend the leave by an additional unpaid month, for a maximum of 18 weeks of paid and unpaid maternity leave.

Moreover, article 154 entitles the female worker, upon return to work following maternity leave, to take fully paid periods of rest, not exceeding one hour per day over

the 24 months following delivery, to breastfeed her child, in addition to other periods of rest provided for all workers.

Furthermore, articles 155 and 156 of the Law prohibit employers from issuing a notice of termination or dismissing a pregnant employee or one who is on maternity leave or for the duration of certified illness resulting from pregnancy, provided that the total period of absence does not exceed 180 days per annum.

Notably, as part of a current labour reform initiative, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development is now considering a variety of changes to the Labour Law, including increasing employer-paid maternity leave from 10 to 14 weeks. However, since maternity leave costs will fall solely on the employer, this could conceivably lead employers to favour recruitment of males.

## **b) Paternity and parental leave**

Paternity leave refers to paid time-off granted exclusively to employed fathers to allow them to take care of the new-born, while parental leave refers to the possibility for either employed parent taking a guaranteed leave of absence to take care of the infant or young child over a period following maternity or paternity leave.

Unlike for maternity leave, which is a statutory entitlement for female employees in virtually all countries, there are no set international labour standards for paternity and



parental leaves. However, the 2009 International Labour Conference Resolution recognised the shared interest of both women and men in work-family reconciliation measures and the importance of providing for paternity and parental leaves to enable working fathers to be more involved in family care.<sup>12</sup>

Article 113 of the Saudi Labour Law guarantees the right of the father to 3 fully paid days of paternity leave upon birth, even if the child is born outside the Kingdom. While the law does not provide for parental leave, several private companies have offered it, reporting a positive change in employee well-being and productivity.

The Saudi Labour Law does not stipulate a paid leave to address family or urgent matters. It does however stipulate the right to a childcare leave following the maternity leave, issued by the Government for employees in civil service who have children with need for special care. According to this provision, an employee is allowed

to take a leave that cannot exceed three years throughout her career, paid one fourth of the salary as long as it is no less than 1,500 Saudi Riyal (SAR) per month. The leave should be taken within the first three years of the child's life. The government can postpone the leave for no more than 90 days as of the start date of the leave.

### c) Flexible work arrangements

Flexible work refers to arrangements that allow employees to restructure their work as to strike a suitable life-work balance, including, among other options, flexible working hours, telecommuting, job sharing, compressed work week, and flexible working locations.<sup>13</sup>

According to ILO Convention 156<sup>14</sup>, which draws the connection between working time, family responsibilities, and gender inequality, flexible work arrangements can play an essential role in helping women join and stay in the labour market while continuing to assume their family responsibilities.

<sup>12</sup> ILO (n.d.), *Maternity and Paternity at work: law and practice across the world*.

<sup>13</sup> ILO, 2004. *Making Work Arrangements More Family-Friendly*.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.labor-watch.net/ar/paper/170>.

## Share the Care Initiative by Procter and Gamble

In January 2021, Procter and Gamble (P&G) reaffirmed its commitment to promoting gender equality by launching this initiative across its offices globally. This innovative policy, which unifies paid parental leave, offers new parents, whether mothers or fathers, eight weeks of fully paid parental leave to care for and bond with the newly born. Staff at P&G Saudi Arabian offices were among the first to take advantage of this new policy, which, within only a few months, led to a palpable emotional uplift among new fathers and mothers.

<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1823156>.

Over the past decade, flexible work has become increasingly common worldwide, with many countries recognising its benefits for both employees and employers, and some introducing legislation on workplace flexibility. Moreover, exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic have impelled more countries to introduce legal reforms embracing the trend.

Seeking to raise labour force participation rates of Saudi nationals, as envisioned by the Saudi Vision 2030, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development launched in 2020 some pioneering national initiatives. One is the Telework Programme, which aims to provide productive remote job opportunities to national labour, based on official contractual relationships between employee and employer, subject to Saudi Labour Law, to help overcome the transportation constraint faced by persons with disabilities, as well as that and other constraints on mothers combining work with childcare.<sup>15</sup> Another initiative, the Flexible Work System, provides for offering flexible hourly work contracts to job seekers, workers wishing to increase their sources of income, and students.<sup>16</sup>

#### **d) Childcare provision**

Article 158 of the Saudi Labour Law stipulates that:

- An employer employing fifty or more women must establish a suitable place with enough caregivers to care for their children

under the age of six where the number of such children reaches 10 or more.

- The Minister of Labour may require an employer who employs a hundred or more women in a city to establish a day-care centre, alone or in partnership with other employers in the same city, or enter into a contractual agreement with an already existing day-care centre to care for their children under the age of six years during working hours.

15  
About the Telework  
Programme

16  
Arab News, Saudi ministry  
launches flexible work  
system.

## **B. Regulatory framework**

### **1. Historical overview**

Historically, pre-school childcare took the form of kindergartens. These are public or private educational institutions regulated by the Ministry of Education, that normally adjoin schools and cater for children aged 3 to 6 of mainly public-sector teachers and administrative staff during school hours only. In contrast to day-care centres that normally operate throughout the working day, kindergartens do not receive children less than 3 years old and conduct educational, rather than simple care, activities.

Such a limited institutional arrangement failed to address the need for a safe environment for children of working women throughout working hours. Consequently, perhaps, despite

efforts to expand female employment, open up new fields of work for women, and feminise some sectors, female employment rates, particularly in the private sector, remained low. It was not until late in the last century that the idea of child hospitality centres came up, initially as a result of concerns raised by Ministry of Social Affairs regarding problems caused by consigning childcare to domestic-help workers. Consultations organised by the Ministry with childcare experts and others finally led to the idea of having a system of specialised centres provide a safe healthy environment for children throughout absence of parents at work. Moreover, such a system would help provide employment to the increasing numbers of female childcare graduates.

## 2. Regulation of child hospitality centres

The Ministry of Social Affairs started issuing provisional licenses for child hospitality centres in 2008. Yet, the sector remained unregulated until February 2011 when the Council of Ministers issued resolution 54 mandating the Ministry to regulate activities and set licencing terms.

In May 2013, following a period of extensive consultations with other relevant government authorities and study of international best practices, the Minister issued regulations stipulating that “activities of national child hospitality centres shall be limited to care and entertainment programmes... to the exclusion of the

educational curricula of the Ministry of Education kindergartens”<sup>17</sup>.

As per the regulations, centres may cater for children aged 1 to 10 years, on condition that they do not receive school-age children during school hours; and may operate from 6 am to 10 pm, provided that each working period not exceed 8 hours. Moreover:

- Centre director has to be a Saudi female and hold a relevant university degree.
- Centre staff need to include additionally a female supervisor, a female nurse, a number of female caregivers depending on the number of children and their ages, a dedicated cleaning worker, a guard, and a driver with a female escort; and all need to have appropriate health certificates.

Standards and conditions set by the competent authorities for building requirements relate to safety, location, lighting, ventilation, surface area of rooms (4m<sup>2</sup>/ child), toilet and hygiene, dedicated space for meal preparation meeting health and safety requirements, and presence of an indoor playground, as well as a shaded outdoor playground.

Furthermore, regulations require that special female committees be established in Ministry branches to verify compliance of centres with regulations.

In July 2019, based on experiences over the preceding few years, as well as on social developments

17

Al Zahrani, N., 2016.

المعوقات التي تواجه الأمهات في مراكز  
ضيافة الأطفال الأهلية بالمملكة العربية  
السعودية من وجهة نظرهن.  
Al Riyadh Newspaper.

related to women empowerment, the regulations were amended to provide for establishment of centres in commercial complexes, markets, universities, hospitals, residential towers, business centres and government facilities. (Ministry of Labour and Social Development, 2021), both to cater for children of working women within these workplaces and attract female investors to the sector.

To further expand the sector, the Ministry sought to regulate the work of home-based child hospitality centres catering for small numbers. The regulations issued in 2020 stipulate that the person providing the service be a healthy, fully dedicated Saudi woman; other caregivers be Saudi women; and children be aged up to 6 years. Other provisions covered, inter alia, employee health, numbers of caregivers in relation to group size, health and safety of infrastructure and equipment, and space capacity.

In 2017, Ministry of Labour and Social Development, through its Human Resources Development Fund (*Hadaf*), established the Qurrah Programme for Support of Child Hospitality Centres for Working Women. In addition to providing an online portal that acts as a communications bridge between centres and parents looking to register their children, thus easing entry of women into the labour market. The Programme covers part of enrolment costs, on condition that the child be no more than 6 years old and the mother:

- Be a Saudi national.
- Be an employee of the private sector.
- Be registered with the General Organisation for Social Insurance (GOSI).
- Have a salary not exceeding 8,000 SAR.



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02

**Childcare services**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has an active labour market, and the population pyramid is characterised by predominance of young people. As shown in the table, labour statistics indicate a total of about 14 million workers, including around 1.14 million Saudi female workers out of a total of around 2.5 million working women.<sup>18</sup> More than 800 thousand Saudi women are seeking employment, bringing the total number of women in the labour market (working + seeking work) to around 3.2 million.

### Labour force participation (First quarter of 2020)

	Male	Female	Total
<b>Total workers</b>	11 159 551	2 476 061	13 635 612
<b>Saudi workers</b>	2 066 553	1 136 870	3 203 423
<b>Non-Saudi workers</b>	9 092 998	1 339 191	10 432 189
<b>Saudi nationals seeking employment</b>	186 969	828 851	1 015 820

**Source:** General Statistics Authority.

**Note:** The General Statistics Authority has issued quarterly reports for 2020, but only figures for the first quarter were retained as it is the last quarter before Covid-19, since the impact of the pandemic on the labour market could be temporary.

Population estimates for the year 2020 indicate that children falling in the age bracket (0-10 years) for eligibility for enrolment in child hospitality centres number around 5,915,531. Moreover, the Saudi female workforce is young, with 50 per cent below the age of 30,<sup>19</sup> which suggests that many will become mothers or have additional children.

Clearly, these statistics highlight importance of developing a robust child hospitality sector, propelled by female investors.

## A. Characteristics of child hospitality sector

### 1. A wide, growing market

Apart from some decline during the pandemic, the sector has grown significantly. In 2016, it comprised 89 centres,<sup>20</sup> compared with 590 just before the pandemic (interview with a key official of the Ministry of Human

<sup>18</sup> This figure does not include house workers rather females working in business institutions, whether governmental private or in the non-profit sector.

<sup>19</sup> General Authority of Statistic, population projections.

<sup>20</sup> Al Zahrani, N., 2016. Op. cit.

Resources and Social Development); a growth rate of 563 per cent in 5 years, or a 113 per cent annual growth rate.

Moreover, given the substantial number of mothers and mothers-to-be in the country, future demand for places is expected to reach millions. A guide to investment in the sector issued by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development indicates that out of 594 governmental facilities employing women, 90 per cent do not have centres and could potentially establish one on the premises or contract an investor to do so.<sup>21</sup>

Expansion of economic participation of women as envisioned by the Saudi Vision 2030 has thus led to escalating demand for child hospitality centre places, and further rapid development of the sector is to be expected.

## 2. Developmental turning-point

Ever since the Saudi Vision 2030 was announced, both the economy and the status of women have developed significantly. Over the past 20 years, the country has recorded the highest rate of growth of participation of women in the labour force among the G20 countries, registering in 2018 an increase of 7 per cent on 1998 figures.<sup>22</sup> Many of the women who have joined the labour force are mothers or mothers-to-be. This, combined with accelerated liberalisation of the labour market with the aim of promoting private-sector employment and

enhancing women empowerment, and the easing of restrictions on public-space activities, investment and employment, places the child hospitality sector at a crucial developmental juncture.

## 3. Types of service

Historically, the sector took the form of community child hospitality centres, based on a 2013 law. Established by Saudi female investors, these are non-governmental and for profit.

With the expansion of the sector and proliferation of home-based child hospitality centres, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development issued governing regulations in 2020. Interviews indicate that regulation of the activity of these centres has led to an increase in fees to a level comparable with that levied by community centres.

According to regulations, the types of child hospitality centres are:

- **Independent child hospitality centre:** A dedicated building; for newborns and children up to ten years old; operate from 6 am to 10 pm.
- **Child hospitality centre in workplace:** A dedicated building or a an on-premises centre; for newborns and children up to ten years old; operate during business hours of workplace.
- **Home-based child hospitality centre:** Part of house dedicated for the service; for newborns and

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2020.

دراسة جدوى لتنظيم إقامة مراكز ضيافة الأطفال في مقرات سوق العمل.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

children up to ten years old; operate 24 hours a day.

- **Child hospitality centre to serve pilgrims:** community hospitality centre in either of the Two Holy Mosques (Mecca/Medina); for newborns and children up to ten years old; operate 24 hours a day.
- **Mobile child hospitality centre:** in a “trailer”; for newborns and children up to ten years old; operate from 6 am to 12 am, except for centres in either of the Two Holy Mosques operate 24 hours a day.

In addition, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing has set May 3, 2021 as the date by which each commercial centre (mall) with an area of 40,000 m<sup>2</sup> or more should provide a child hospitality centre with an area of no less than 50 m<sup>2</sup>.

#### 4. A Saudized and feminised sector

Ever since its emergence and regulation, the child hospitality sector has always been perceived as a potential source of employment for Saudi women, and as such Saudization has been one of its historical characteristics.

As shown in the table, the labour force in the country is predominantly non-Saudi. This is particularly the case in the private sector, since the public sector is mostly Saudized. In contrast, the child hospitality sector has been Saudized and, moreover, feminised right from inception. Regulations require that directors

of centres be Saudi women, and interviews confirmed that indeed they are. In March 2019, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development organised the First Child Hospitality Centres Forum; 90 per cent of the 80 attendees were women, with representative of regulatory bodies and support organisations constituting the remainder. The event brochure also indicates that the 99 participating centres are owned by women.

## B. Female investors in sector

Focus group discussions with centre investors and owners indicate that one major challenge is the overly long licensing process, involving first the Ministry of Commerce for obtaining a commercial record, followed by the Municipality for securing a commercial standards license, then the Ministry of Social Development for preliminary approval before examination of the building or designated space to ascertain compliance with civil-defence safety and other requirements to issue final approval. Complaints about the excessive length of process are in fact long standing and have over time received press.<sup>23,24</sup> Furthermore, investors wished for less rigid regulations, with several criticising the requirement that employees have to be Saudi women, since foreign labour is much cheaper and more accommodating.

23  
Mohamad D., 2009.  
في السعودية جهود فردية للرعاية النهارية.  
Laha Magazine.

24  
Al-Brahim, A. (1 January  
2014),  
المرأة العاملة تظمن على أبنائها بعيدا عن  
الاعتماد على الخادمة.  
Al Riyadh Newspaper.



Investors commended the “Qurrah” programme for helping many women join the workforce and motivating others to consider doing so. However, the following concerns were raised: slow response to applications; cumbersomeness of registration on the portal due to often encountered technical problems; and delays in payments to centre owners causing financial difficulties and thus discouraging enrolment of children supported by the programme.

Insights into why mothers seek to enrol children were also provided by the investors. Mothers tend to be mostly employed in the medical sector, as doctors or nurses, seeking to avoid leaving the child at home for extended periods under the care of a housemaid, while some mothers of pre-school children value social interaction opportunities with other children at the centre, believing it to speed up speech acquisition. Interestingly, some non-working mothers enrol the child due to unavailability of places in kindergartens, or because they pursue a social experience for the child, rather than an educational programme as in kindergartens.

## C. Parties supporting child hospitality sector

In addition to the main government bodies involved in regulating the

sector, several other parties offer support to the sector, either by investing it or in pursuit of economic empowerment of women.

These include:

- Government bodies that offer, mainly financial, support to small and medium enterprises, including:
  - The Social Development Bank through its programme for support of start-ups and the Dulani Business Centre.
  - The Small and Medium Enterprises General Authority (Monsha’at), linked to *Hadaf*, through its programme for support of small enterprise and its Kafalah initiative.
  - *Hadaf* through its Nine Tenths programme, which offers financing solutions, and the Tamhir programme for training worker.
- The Not-for-profit programmes supporting small, particularly female-owned, enterprises, such as Deem Al-Manahil Fund, which promotes female entrepreneurship, and Tamkin Society, which incubates female-owned enterprises.
- The aforementioned Qurrah programme, which financially supports enrolment of children in centres.





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# 03

## Beneficiary roles and viewpoints

## A. Survey results

An online survey was conducted to capture opinions of mother users to understand impact of the service on their lives, as well as their needs and expectations.

### 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

75 per cent of respondents have 3 or less children, the rest 4 or more. 55 per cent have children below the age of 5. Reported family income distribution is as follows:

Family Income (SAR 1,000)	Percentage of respondents
> 15	31
10-15	27
5-10	26
< 5	16

Thus 58 per cent of respondents have family income exceeding SAR 10,000, which suggests that beneficiaries are largely middle-income.

### 2. Employment status of respondents

53 per cent of respondents (52) are currently working. Out of 30 who have never worked, 23 reported the reason, with 83 per cent citing household responsibilities

and childcare. Out of 16 who had reported quitting job, 10 reported the same reason.

Out of the 68 who were working or who had worked before, 66 per cent hold or had held non-managerial positions. 59 per cent of those currently working have spent in job 2 to 10 years, and only 10 per cent longer than 10. 60 per cent held full-time positions and 27 per cent work part-time for reasons related to childcare. Finally, 53 per cent of those currently working work in the private sector.

These findings confirm that childcare is a constraint on economic participation of women, impelling them to resort to part-time work or even to quit or shun the labour market altogether.

### 3. Conditions of work

59 per cent of respondents indicated absence of work flexibility, and 72 per cent indicated unavailability of a telecommuting option, with almost all declaring that they would have used this modality were it available.

68 per cent of respondents indicated availability of unpaid leave, 59 per cent availability of paid leave, and 75 per cent availability of maternity leave.

59 per cent of respondents indicated availability of a breastfeeding at workplace option, and 13 per cent indicated not making use of it.

These findings suggest that conditions of work are misaligned with current legal and regulatory frameworks, for flexible-work initiatives have already been launched and legal employment contracts enshrine the right to paid leave for all employees, including domestic workers who are mainly non-Saudi women. This apparent misalignment may be attributable to smallness and lack of representativity of the survey sample. However, it may also be due to a lack of awareness of rights to leaves and flexible work arrangements and also to the recency of the flexible work initiatives.

#### **4. Availability, accessibility and affordability of child hospitality centres**

78 per cent of respondents indicated that child hospitality centres are unavailable at their workplaces, and only 13 per cent indicated benefiting from workplace centres.

60 per cent of respondents indicated spending less than SAR 2,000 for the services a child hospitality centre. However, 85 per cent reported receiving no financial support, which is rather puzzling since the Qurrah programme commits to supporting enrolment of the first two children of working mothers. Reconditeness of administrative procedures is a probable cause. However, it is also worth keeping in mind that the findings could have been different had the sample been larger.

Reasons why women enrol children in child hospitality centres varied. 47 per cent of respondents cited lack of available childcare alternatives and 34 per cent long working hours.

The multiple-choice question on impact of child hospitality centres on women offered seven choices. Yet, 23 per cent of respondents chose “enabled me to concentrate better on work” and 20 per cent chose “enabled me to go to work”. Only 2 per cent indicated “other reasons” than the six choices emphasising empowering women to work, train, pursue education and get promoted. Thus, 98 per cent of respondents believe that the centres have helped empower women.

The findings on impact on employment status of mothers are similar. 57 per cent of respondents indicated that availability of centre services enabled them to continue working, and 18 per cent that it allowed them to achieve better work results.

The question on the most important characteristics women look for in a child hospitality centre was also multichoice. The three top respondent choices were appropriate location; safety, security and cleanliness; and flexible operating hours to suit schedules of working mothers.

Most respondents (72 per cent) believed children aged 0 to 2 years to be most in need of centre services, with the percentage dropping as age range increases.

44 per cent of respondents indicated satisfaction with the centre used, 10 per cent were unsatisfied, and the remainder were somewhat satisfied but wish for improvements.

Notwithstanding the evident usefulness of centres, 57 per cent of respondents indicated that given the choice, they would rather leave their children with a home carer, either a family member or a qualified baby carer. The reason is unclear, but could be the high running cost of enrolment in centres.

When asked whether they had a reliable alternative to care for their children in emergencies, such as child sickness or closure of centre, only 42 per cent of respondents indicated having such an alternative, with 73 per cent of those indicating the alternative to be a family member, and only 5 per cent the father. Of those with no alternative, 44 per cent would rearrange their work schedule, 28 per cent would take unpaid leave, and 25 per cent would take paid leave.

## 5. Concerns regarding childcare

In responding to the question of whether childcare was a cause of stress on both working and nonworking mothers, 13 per cent of respondents reported it to cause no stress and 26 per cent “some” stress, while 39 per cent reported it to be “challenging” and 22 per cent “arduous”. Major concerns regarding childcare itself were cost,

at 41 per cent, and lack of childcare during hours of need, at 28 per cent, while 14 per cent reported absence of childcare facilities for relatively older children, particularly after school hours, 9 per cent reported difficulties with means of transportation, and 8 per cent complained of lack of quality.

## 6. Participation of husbands in childcare

60 per cent of respondents reported husband participation to be full, 47 per cent between one quarter and a half, and 29 per cent between half and three quarters, i.e., three quarters reported it to range between one quarter and three quarters. 58 per cent of the rest, i.e., those who reported no participation, attributed it to the husband being too busy with work, while 39 per cent reported that the husband considered childcare to be the exclusive responsibility of the mother. Thus, only 15 per cent of all respondents reported that the husband refraining from participation in childcare as a matter of principle, which may indicate changes in role perception and a tendency towards greater participation of husbands in housework and childcare. Responses also indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a positive impact on family relationships, with 68 per cent of respondents reporting increased participation of husbands in childcare.

## B. Impact of COVID-19 on childcare and women economic empowerment

70 respondents confirmed that the pandemic had an impact on their work: 18 quit job, 26 reduced working hours, and the rest did not specify the impact. 66 per cent of those impacted cited increased childcare responsibilities due to closure of centres as the cause, even though 73 per cent of the impacted were working from home.

46 per cent of respondents also stated that childcare was a significant source of stress during the pandemic, 30 per cent viewed it as a challenge that they were able to cope with, and 15 per cent saw it as causing low stress levels.

Clearly, the pandemic significantly impacted how working mothers viewed childcare, with ensuring safety of children and protecting them from the virus becoming a major concern, and home management becoming even more strenuous due to requirements of cleaning and sanitisation. 78 per

cent of respondents stated that time for childcare and domestic work increased during the pandemic, and 77 per cent did not have someone to care for children during closure of centres. Of those who had (16 women), 11 stated that a member of the household (husband, housekeeper, another family member) undertook the task.

The pandemic had a differentiated impact on respondents. 40 per cent stated that the pandemic negatively affected their concentration on work, 16 per cent stated that they had to work longer hours to compensate for time spent caring for children and undertaking housework, 16 per cent had to take unpaid leave, and 12 per cent had to reduce work hours. Moreover, 9 per cent indicated that they had been excluded from important work assignments, and 6 per cent missed a promotion opportunity because of increased care responsibilities.

Clearly, due to health concerns during the pandemic, coupled with heavier domestic and childcare tasks, many respondents had to spend part of their working hours on family responsibilities, compensating for lost time either by working beyond their usual working hours or by taking unpaid leave.







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# 04

## Conclusion and recommendations

This case study reviewed female employment and economic empowerment of women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as the historical context for establishing the child hospitality sector in response to social developments. The primary motive for child hospitality centres has been to protect children of working mother who would otherwise be left in the care of untrained domestic workers. However, availability of the centres, along with empowerment of women policies and regulations and social and cultural developments, has promoted participation of women in the labour force.

Since the establishment of the child hospitality sector, mainly organized through children's centres in workplaces, at home or in mobile centres, the number of centres has significantly increased to reach 590 before the COVID-19 pandemic. Most importantly, these centres provide care for children under 3 years of age, which was not available nor institutionalized before the establishment of this sector.

The study also stressed the importance of care as an investment sector and highlighted some challenges that must be overcome to advance the sector:

- Childcare often inhibits Saudi women's participation in the labour market. It also leads women to work on a part-time basis and affects their career progression.
- Childcare is generally a source of pressure for mothers in terms of cost, lack of childcare during hours of need and for certain ages.
- Mothers who enrol their children in the centres tend to belong to the middle-class, have on average 3 or less children, and most do not receive financial support from the Qurrah programme.

- The pandemic has had a direct impact on women: onerous increase in childcare responsibilities due to closure of centres, as well as in the domestic chores of cleaning and sanitisation.

## Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations can be made to support the childcare sector and achieve economic empowerment for women:

### In terms of law and regulations

- Improve legal frameworks and regulations related to leaves in line with international recommendations, namely maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave.
- Finalize the needed regulations for hospitality centres at home and in workplaces.
- Consider integrating men into the care sector to counter entrenched stereotypes, particularly in investment, management and employment.

## In terms of services provided

- Promote the establishment of child hospitality centres, streamline the procedures for their establishment, and consider the possibility of reducing their operational cost.
- Promote the Qurrah programme in all hospitality centres and facilitate the registration process.
- Review implementation, delivery and expansion as necessary of flexible working arrangements.

This study highlights the importance of the childcare sector and the policy and legal frameworks related thereto for the society as a whole. It therefore calls for more in-depth analysis for its advancement.



For long, female employment remained primarily concentrated in public education followed by health, it soon became apparent that the saturated public education sector is unable to provide employment for the increasing numbers of female graduates seeking jobs, leading to a steep increase in female unemployment. Persistently high female unemployment rates thus called for addressing both regulatory and cultural challenges boldly; a task undertaken admirably by the large-scale reform programme envisaged by the Saudi Vision 2030.

This study focuses on the economic participation of women and the measures taken to address it, with emphasis on the child hospitality sector that emerged in response to the need for childcare while women are at work. It seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of: characteristics of the childcare economy in the country, its major stakeholders, changes over the last decade and during the COVID-19 pandemic, needs and expectations of families, and the broader policy environment framing public and private provision of care.



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