

Research paper

## Intersectionality and Islamic Feminism

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the persistent socio-cultural barriers obstructing Saudi women's full participation in the labour market, despite governmental initiatives to enhance their economic inclusion. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the study integrates intersectionality and Islamic feminism. Drawing on a qualitative methodology, the study draws on 36 in-depth interviews with Saudi men from three Bedouin tribes in Arar, Northern Saudi Arabia. The paper highlights how tribal identity and religious ideology shape restrictive norms that sustain gender disparities. At the core of this analysis lies the concept of "invisible rules" (hudud), implicit boundaries that govern gender segregation and restrict professional opportunities. The term ayb (shame) further reinforces these boundaries by framing women's deviation from social expectations as moral transgression. The novelty of this study lies in its use of intersectionality to uncover the hidden causes of gender inequality and in its exploration of cultural and religious constraints from an Islamic feminist perspective. These deeply embedded social norms present a significant obstacle to governmental efforts aimed at achieving full integration of women into the labour market. By challenging entrenched structures, this study underscores the necessity of reconfiguring socio-religious norms to advance gender equality and facilitate Saudi women's full integration into the workforce.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, gender equality, Saudi labour market, Islamic feminism

The Saudi government, under the leadership of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, launched Vision 2030 in 2016 to diversify national income and enhance economic participation ([www.vision2030.gov.sa/en](http://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en)). As outlined in the National Transformation Program's 2023 KPIs, Saudi women's labour market participation rose from 21.2% in 2017 to 34.2% in 2023, surpassing the 28.7% target. Similarly, according to the World Economic Forum (2024), the "female labour-force participation has nearly doubled over time, from 22.5% in 2006 to 43.2% in 2024." Women in managerial positions also increased significantly, reaching 43.7% in 2023, well beyond the projected 30.3%. This surge in female workforce integration has expanded women's roles across various sectors, dismantling traditional employment restrictions (Mutaric, 2025; Varshney, 2019; Jamjoom & Mills, 2023).

The appointment of female ambassadors and leaders in education reflects broader advancements in women's empowerment. Legal reforms (Polak, 2024) have expanded access to traditionally male-dominated fields, while flexible work policies and childcare services have enhanced workforce participation. Initiatives like "Wusool" and the "Shaml Initiative" (2023) further support women's economic inclusion, reinforcing governmental gender equality efforts.

However, research on gender equality in the labour market in Saudi Arabia found that even with significant advancements for Saudi women, gender disparities persist. Although the Saudi government has prioritized modernization initiatives to increase women's economic participation through political reforms, the lack of corresponding changes in societal attitudes—shaped by deeply ingrained tribal traditions and religious values—has substantially hindered meaningful progress (Sian et al., 2020; Al Dossari & Murphy, 2023). As Almutarie (2025) demonstrates, “gender inequality continues to pose substantial obstacles. Although participation rates have increased, barriers remain deeply rooted” (p. 3).

It is essential, therefore, to address this “gender inequality” (Almutarie, 2025) to reach women's full inclusion in the labor market. To gain deeper insight into the root causes of this inequality and to unravel the intricate interplay of factors shaping both the pace and process of women's integration into the labour market, intersectionality serves as a pivotal analytical framework. Accordingly, this study employs an intersectional approach to examine how the socio-cultural framework, particularly the impact of entrenched tribal traditions and patriarchal interpretations of religious doctrines, shapes and influences the dynamics of women's participation in the workforce (Al Alhareth et al., 2015; Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018).

Currently, peer-reviewed studies infrequently employ intersectionality to examine the hidden causes of gender inequality in the labour market. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the misalignment between governmental initiatives and entrenched societal norms shaping women's workforce participation. It explores how tribal ideologies and patriarchal religious interpretations perpetuate inequality and introduces Islamic feminism as a framework for challenging these barriers.

The study is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the problem and provides a description of the research aims and rationale. This is followed by a literature review on the topic. Next, a brief overview of the theory of intersectionality is presented. The methodology and data collection methods are then described. Following this, the results section examines the empirical data, applying intersectionality to understand the key findings. Finally, the study outlines its limitations, followed by a discussion section that interprets the findings and explores their implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In Saudi Arabia, tribal customs and strictly patriarchal interpretations of religious texts concerning women's employment play a pivotal role in shaping societal norms, cultural traditions, and social expectations. These factors significantly impact the degree to which women can achieve full integration into the labour market. Moreover, the persistent disconnect between structural reforms and deeply embedded social and institutional norms continues to pose a substantial obstacle to attaining gender equality in the workforce (Al Alhareth et al., 2015; Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018; Aldossari & Murphy, 2023; Al-Rasheed, 2013; Aldossari et al., 2021; Sian et al., 2020). Various cultural, religious, and community obstacles, including traditional patriarchal systems, tribalism, a conservative interpretation of Islam, and stringent gender segregation norms, must be addressed and overcome (Sidani, 2005; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011; Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Sidani et al., 2015; Abalkhail & Allan, 2015; Hodges, 2017; Syed et al., 2018; Aldossari & Murphy, 2023).

Scholars examined how these components significantly influence women's participation in the labour force. They presented several examples highlighting the disparity between government-led policy changes and prevailing social attitudes and norms. Researchers have examined various aspects of the impact of attitudes on career development (Jamjoom & Mills, 2023; Sian et al., 2020; Syed et al., 2018), as well as the challenges posed by gender-mixed settings (Aldossari & Calvard, 2022; Alkhaled & Berglund, 2018). Several researchers examined how these factors influence organizational strategies aimed at enhancing women's contributions to the workforce (Aldossari & Murphy, 2023). The influence of these factors also extends to women's representation in corporate governance, particularly their presence on boards of directors and progression into leadership roles, affecting both gender diversity and broader aspects of boardroom diversity (Muthuswamy & Savithri, 2025; Eskandarany, 2023; Gordini & Rancati, 2017; Alexander, 2016; Kakabadse et al., 2015; Carter et al., 2003).

Other researchers have specifically addressed the hurdles encountered by women leaders, noting that gender segregation limits access to senior leadership roles (Jouharah M., 2019; Abalkhail, 2017). Moreover, scholars have observed that patriarchal cultural norms significantly shape women's career trajectories, including their selection of medical specialties, such as urology (Al Azahrani et al., 2023), as well as their progression into leadership positions within higher education (Abalkhail, 2018). In sectors like tourism, cultural and social barriers continue to impede women's access to senior management positions (Sobaih, 2024). Additionally, studies have highlighted the prevalence of Saudi women being hired for lower-level roles, such as customer service officers in the financial industry and entry-level administrative positions in healthcare (Tlaiss, 2022).

As a result, persistent patriarchal structures reinforce deeply embedded gender-segregated labour patterns, restricting women primarily to conventionally perceived "feminine" precarious roles within both the public and private sectors (Hennekam et al., 2017). Consequently, women are frequently steered toward employment within

gender-segregated institutions, limiting their professional opportunities and career progression (Aldossari & Calvard, 2022). Progression in women's careers is obstructed by patriarchal attitudes that constrain their autonomy in the workplace and impede their capacity to discharge job responsibilities (Hennekam et al., 2017).

The consensus among previous studies is that the pervasive *gender-segregated social norm* poses a formidable barrier to the government's endeavors aimed at fostering complete women's integration into the labour force. Although the male guardianship (*mahram*) system was officially abolished in 2019 as part of broader public policy reforms (Arab News, 2019), the persistent influence of tribal traditions remains deeply entrenched. This enduring cultural force continues to play a significant role in the exclusion of women from the public sphere and the reinforcement of gender segregation within society (Varshney, 2019).

Adopting intersectionality as an approach to study this tribal thought necessitates a preliminary overview of the term, which designates a complex and multifaceted concept.

It was coined by lawyer and anti-racist feminist critic and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe a new methodology and praxis in Black Feminism that was adopted by women of color and other marginalized groups. The term appeared in 1989 within Crenshaw's influential essay, "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex," to describe how race and gender intersect and overlap with one another and shape Black women's experiences of oppression. In this regard, Ji-Sun (2018) proposes that "in naming intersectionality, Crenshaw gave social justice theorists and activists an important tool for analyzing the nuances and complexities of oppression" (2). Being a tool of analysis, intersectionality is used to understand individual and collective experiences and how different identity categories and social institutions shape those experiences in hierarchic systems of power and privilege.

"Intersectionality is heuristic in nature" and is a "prism" used to highlight the different constituents of particular problems (May 2015, 19). According to Patricia Hill Collins (2006), heuristic means "a problem-solving or analytic tool" (13). It is a tool that enables different activists, and feminists in particular, to discover the different mechanisms of subordination that apply to themselves by attending to the hidden and taken-for-granted. Intersectionality enables theorists to think about oppression, not as an intelligible, but as a nebulous experience that requires different causes of oppression. Vivian May (2015), who provides a detailed analysis of this approach, says in this regard that "[i]ntersectional practices ... are both recursive and flexible, rather than fixed or set in stone" (228). Being a malleable and multidimensional orientation, it is necessary to grapple with its main tenets in order to get a fully detailed understanding of it.

## METHODOLOGY

The study of intersectionality in this paper is buttressed by a qualitative, interview-based research approach, focusing on three Bedouin tribes located in Arar, the Northern region of Saudi Arabia. This methodology was considered appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research and the objective to comprehensively grasp the intricacies of local settings (following Tlaiss, 2014, 2015; Aldossari & Murphy, 2023). Utilizing in-depth interviews enabled the researcher to gain insights into the viewpoints of Bedouin men, thereby representing non-monolithic tribal thought.

To explore tribal thought and religious influences, this research followed the sampling strategies used by Al Dossari & Murphy (2023). Initially, two Saudi friends of the researcher facilitated access to the first participants. Access to interviewees representing tribal thought was obtained through colleagues' brothers and family connections. Given the sensitivity of the subject, particularly its engagement with tribal identity, the researcher was advised not to make intertribal comparisons to avoid misunderstandings. This study followed established ethical principles for qualitative research involving human participants. Formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required for this research, as it was conducted outside an institutional IRB framework and involved voluntary, non-invasive interviews. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided informed consent prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and all identifying information was removed during transcription and analysis.

The selection of a male-only sample was justified because the study aimed to capture men's perspectives on women's employment and socio-religious norms, which play a decisive role in shaping tribal thought and decision-making. The selection criteria required participants to be male, members of one of the three main Bedouin tribes in Arar, and from diverse generations and intellectual and family backgrounds. Using this sampling strategy, 36 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Saudi men were conducted. All interviews took place via phone and WhatsApp, as it was uncommon to meet in cafes or other public places for such interviews. The respondents ranged in age from 24 to 86 years old. Among them, two held PhDs, 26 had bachelor's degrees, and 8 had secondary education certificates. Participants' profiles are summarized in Table 1.

Data were collected between February and May 2024, focusing on tribal men's perceptions of mixed-gender jobs. Each interview lasted about half an hour. In accordance with Aldossari & Murphy (2023), all interviews were first transcribed in Arabic and subsequently translated into English, employing a back-translation method to

maintain the accuracy and integrity of the original meaning. The data were coded using thematic analysis, with initial codes derived inductively from participants' responses and refined to capture recurring themes related to tribal and religious norms.

**Table 1**

*Summary of the participants' demographic characteristics*

| Contextual Background | N (Total 36) |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| Age                   |              |
| 20-30 years           | 14           |
| 31-40 years           | 14           |
| 41-50 years           | 2            |
| 51-60 years           | 1            |
| 61-70                 | 2            |
| 71-81                 | 2            |
| 81-90                 | 1            |
| Marital Status        |              |
| Single                | 14           |
| Married               | 22           |
| Divorced              | 0            |
| Qualification         |              |
| Secondary education   | 8            |
| Bachelor degree       | 26           |
| Postgraduate (PhD)    | 2            |
| Tribal affiliation    |              |
| Tribal                | 36           |
| Non-tribal            | 0            |
| Religious beliefs     |              |
| Very religious        | 22           |
| Moderately religious  | 33           |
| Not very religious    | 1            |

## FINDINGS

The examination of intersectionality within participants' narratives reveals four distinct categories of male tribal thought that influence the shaping of Saudi women's participation in the labour market. The first and second categories are discerned through the examination of the intersectionality of gender and tribal identity. A third category emerges from the study of the intersectionality of gender and religion. The fourth category stands independently and encompasses potential strategies or solutions that could facilitate the inclusion of Saudi women in the labour market, counteracting the influence of tribal and religious factors.

### The intersectionality of gender and tribal identity: Invisible hudud/boundaries

In her novel *Dreams of Trespass*, Fatma Mernissi (1994) defines “Hudud/frontiers” as imaginary boundaries. The *hudud* is “whatever the teacher [of the Koranic school] forbade” (18). Naber (2012) defines the *hudud* as the “unspoken rules” her parents dictated to her (2). In Arabo-Islamic culture, these invisible rules or *hudud* (boundaries) dictate gender roles. They set the limits women must not transgress in order to be accepted within the patriarchal system that established these roles.

Bedouin gender orthodoxy refers to the gender roles and associated beliefs within Bedouin tribes. Essentially, the study of the intersectionality of gender and tribal identity delves into the complex interplay of various factors shaping the identity of Saudi women, who simultaneously define their roles as women and members of tribes. These factors, while often hidden or overlooked, contribute to the societal norm of gender segregation, which many studies attribute to gender inequality in the labour market. The tribal identity serves as a significant category of analysis, encompassing customs and traditions that may trace back to pre-Islamic times and are influenced by historical cultural backgrounds.

As previously mentioned, this study centers on the Northern border region of Saudi Arabia, specifically Arar, renowned for its Bedouin tribes. As defined in Wikipedia, “the English word bedouin comes from the Arabic badawī, which means ‘desert-dweller,’ and is traditionally contrasted with ḥāḍir, the term for sedentary people.” Arar emerged in the early 1950s as a result of seminomadic individuals being drawn to the water resources provided

near the Trans Arabian Pipeline (Tapline). Although Arar has evolved into a large urban center, its residents are commonly identified as Bedouins.

### The 'without-discussion' category

Men in this category are classified as the “*without-discussion*” category, because in response to the question of whether they accept gender mixing jobs or not, their answer is without discussion; they refuse that. This category of Bedouin men believe there should not be any type of gender-mixing in the labour market because it is *ayb*/shame and *'ar*/disgrace. Without giving any argument or cause except that it is *ayb* and *'ar* to the tribe that their women intermix with men, their answers often included statements such as: *I completely oppose the idea of gender-mixed jobs ... She can contribute to the workforce, but her employment should be confined to the field of education or Quranic recitation. I do not support women working in humanitarian voluntary roles ... I am only comfortable with her working remotely, in any type of job.* (Participant 2, aged 27, married, tribal)

When asked whether he accepts marrying a woman working in a mixed gender job, participant 2 replies, “*It is from the seventh of impossibilities that I accept that.*” The interviewee’s tone of complete refusal leads the researcher to halt any further attempts to investigate hesitancy in his opinion, as the interviewee appears determined and unwilling to engage in any further discussion on the matter.

While younger participants are willing to elaborate on the topic, older ones simply state, “*I do not accept women working.*” When questioned about their reasoning, they simply assert, “*A woman’s place is at home*” (Participant 19, aged 86, married, tribal). Others explain their refusal by stating, “*Since I can remember, there has never been gender mixing. It is not something we are accustomed to. It has been this way for many years*” (Participant 23, aged 24, married, tribal).

Participants’ rejection of gender mixing, rooted in tradition rather than in logical reasoning, underscores the need to examine the historical and cultural forces sustaining this norm in Bedouin society. Studies on Saudi Bedouin tribes reveal that *'ar* (disgrace) and *ayb* (shame) trace back to the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide (*wa'd al-banat*), driven by fears of dishonor and economic hardship. In a nomadic tribal context, male offspring were valued for military strength, while captured women risked introducing the foreign *Other* into the tribe. The earliest recorded case involves Qays ibn 'Asim al-Tamimi, who buried his daughters to prevent dishonor, a practice also seen in the Rabi'ah tribe. Ultimately, this tradition sought to suppress women’s autonomy, as their mobility and interactions with outsiders were perceived as threats to tribal honor and lineage purity (Al-Samman, 2015, pp. 46–47).

The societal norm of gender segregation thus embodies a deeply rooted historical, cultural, and psychological fear of external threats, compounded by the cultural trauma that women’s interactions with outsiders may tarnish the tribe’s honor and integrity. It serves, therefore, as a symbolic substitution for the practice of *wa'd*. This practice has evolved throughout time symbolically into establishing unspoken rules of avoiding interaction with outsiders. Some Bedouin tribes in Arar, as depicted in the participants’ narratives, reject gender mixing *without discussion* due to the fear of dishonoring themselves in the eyes of other tribes. Additionally, within the same tribe, families may encounter varied reactions from their fellow tribe members.

One participant mentioned that tribe members might reprimand someone who allows his daughter to work in mixed-gender environments, such as a café. He recounted, “*They (tribe members and close family) might confront you and say, 'Your daughter is working in a café? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?'*” (Participant 17, aged 29, married, tribal). Similarly, another participant noted that “*The Bedouin tribes consider it ayb. They might remark, 'Look at this man's daughter, she is working in the hareem/women's market.' They may also comment, 'Look at this woman, she has left her house to work in the market'*” (Participant 1, aged 59, married, tribal). Similarly, another participant highlighted that “*People might discuss you in majaliss, men's gatherings, making you a subject of conversation. It is ayb*” (Participant 2, aged 27, married, tribal). The situation could even escalate to direct threats, as participant 23 shared, “*The tribe may come to you and threaten you if you let your daughter work in such mixed environments*” (Participant 23, aged 63, married, tribal). In fact, the tribe significantly influences members’ adherence to its norms, with the threat of negative talk in men’s gatherings serving as a moral punishment for those who do not comply. That is why, in collectivist tribal cultures, a sense of belonging to the community often takes precedence (Barakat, 1993; Adamson et al., 2021; Taylor & Butler, 2020; Eskandarany, 2023).

The historical context, revealed through examining the intersectionality of gender and tribal identity and exploring the interplay of underlying factors as emphasized by Crenshaw, illuminates the participants’ narratives where concepts of *ayb*/ shame and *'ar*/ disgrace play a crucial role in defining gender roles. This context supports the assertion that “tribalism, associated with being a member of clans originating in Saudi Arabia, enforces certain restrictions on tribal women, dictating their behavior and defining what educational and occupational opportunities are considered appropriate for them” (Hakiem, 2021).

This category illustrates the intersectionality of gender and tribal identity, revealing how historical customs and unspoken rules continue to shape contemporary limitations on women’s labour market participation.

### The ‘only-on-condition’ category

Men are classified as the “*only-on-condition*” category because while they accept gender mixing they still put conditions that may guarantee that the invisible *hudud*/boundaries are not transgressed. This category of Bedouin men believe that gender-mixing in the labour market is possible when certain conditions are met; their answers often included statements such as, “*Bedouin tribes in Arar accept that their women work in mixed gender settings after they are reassured*” (Participant 1, aged 59, married, tribal). As the majority of participants under this category expressed, they fear that their women experience harassment at work. When asked about the cause that can be behind feeling not at ease or refusing the mixed gender settings, this previous participant explained: “*The problem is that it is an Arab society that is not used to mixed gender norms; so a woman may be a victim of harassment, and these Bedouin tribes do not accept someone who says bad words or harasses their daughters ... all people are afraid of harassment.*”

In the same vein, other participants mentioned that behavioral aggression or harassment is the main cause behind putting conditions and restrictions on joining the mixed gender settings in the labour market for their female dependents. When reminded about the government’s strict anti-harassment laws, which include a two-year prison sentence or a fine of 100,000 riyals, one participant responded: “*There are problems, there is harassment ... so I am afraid of harassment. My sister may not tell me she faced harassment once, twice, or thrice*” (Participant 2, aged 20-30, married, tribal). Under this category, honor is still operating as a tribal norm that must be watched and is a primary component that determines women’s inclusion in the labour market.

In Arab cultural thought, women’s honor is intrinsically tied to virginity, the loss of which is perceived as a dishonor to the tribe. Within this framework, the hymen becomes both “a mark of virginity and of delineating the boundaries of the body that is called female” (Abu-Odeh, 1996, p. 151), what Yamani (1996) terms the “social hymen” that prescribes women’s roles and regulates their movement (6). As Abu-Odeh (1996) argues, the discourses of gender and virginity “criss-cross so intricately that they are hardly distinguishable,” such that Arab womanhood itself is constructed through the performance of virginity (151). Virginity thus demarcates the *hudud* or frontiers of women’s bodies, policed by male guardians and sustained through social prohibitions. The cumulative effect of these prohibitions, as Abu-Odeh (1996) explains, is that every act a woman abstains from simultaneously constructs her as both female and virgin (152).

The role of the father, brother, or son as a male guardian/mahram of the woman’s body is given by society. As Abu-Odeh (1996) posits, “[t]he men who are connected to women in this honour bond are many: father, brother, son, husband” (156). Honor is where he can perform this role as a man, for “[v]irginity, in its expanded sense (the vaginal/the bodily/the social) is also the locus of his gender in that he needs to guard, supervise, and defend against incursions, his women’s virginity” (153). Therefore, for men in the Bedouin culture, guarding the virginity of their female relatives is a crucial aspect of their role as male guardians, and it is closely tied to their sense of honor and gender identity.

When it is impossible to accompany them in their work settings, male guardians make sure there are substitutions like “cameras,” other people, rules that will replace them in guarding the virginity of their female relatives. Participants implicitly assert that they permit female dependents to work in mixed-gender jobs, but only under specific conditions. These jobs must be governmental, not private, as governmental roles typically include traditional female positions in sectors such as healthcare, where the presence of other women, camera surveillance, and protective measures are assured. This view is clear in statements such as the following: “*What type of jobs, first of all? ... Government jobs with good salaries in open places like hospitals, where there are cameras and all, pose no problem. But in private jobs, where the boss may be male, the woman may be a victim of sexual harassment.*” (Participant 5, aged 30-40, married, tribal).

Some participants, while not entirely opposed to jobs in the private sector, impose conditions on the specific types of roles within this domain. The majority of participants in this group uniformly oppose the emergence of new job trends in Arar, particularly the position of baristas in cafes, exclusively held by women. Despite the primary responsibility of baristas being the preparation and serving of beverages like coffee and tea, this job faces rejection for several reasons. These include its association with alcohol due to the word “bar” in its name, along with various other perceived connotations surrounding the role. As expressed by one participant: “*It is prohibited to allow our women to work in cafes. It is forbidden, the shishas and all these things*” (Participant 12, aged 30-40, married, tribal).

Participants reject roles such as barista or waiter because these jobs are historically linked to non-tribal men who were considered slaves, and thus regarded as socially diminished. One participant emphasized that gender segregation is “a hallmark of distinguished Arab tribes with rich histories,” adding: “*I do not accept mixed-gender jobs in the private sector because anyone could harass my sister... However, in hospitals, where there are cameras and police presence, nothing will happen to her*” (Participant 7, aged 20–30, single, tribal). Another participant similarly explained that “*being a waiter serving shishas in cafes is viewed as socially disrespectful. It is akin to being seen as an odalisque,*” since this role was “*given to slaves and non-tribal men from other countries,*” making it inappropriate for both women and tribal men (Participant 32, aged 20–30, single, tribal).

Participants argued that women in cafes or restaurants are objectified “to attract clients,” exposing them to negative judgments and harassment, unlike in regulated spaces such as hospitals (Participants 24, 36, 16, and 7, aged 20–30, tribal). Concerns also extended to attire, with one noting that aprons over abayas reveal “all her body parts” (Participant 23). Women’s bodies and honor were framed as *hudud* that must be safeguarded.

Therefore, the groups of men identified as “without-discussion” and “only-on-condition” reflect tribal ideologies ingrained with concepts of honor, shame (*ayb*), and disgrace (*ar*), which demarcate the parameters within which women are allowed to function. Gender disparities within the labour market must be contextualized within this framework, wherein the intersectionality of gender and tribal identity, shaped by historical and cultural factors, indirectly influences the establishment of implicit regulations dictating the permissible spheres of employment for Saudi women in Arar.

To fully comprehend the influence of socio-cultural factors on women’s roles, it is essential to also examine the interplay of religious dimensions. Religious beliefs and practices shape societal norms and expectations, often reinforcing or challenging cultural traditions, and thus play a pivotal role in determining the opportunities available to women.

### The intersectionality of gender and religion: Visible patriarchal hermeneutics

In the context of exploring the intersectionality of religion and gender, the term “religion” specifically pertains to Arabo-Islamic culture, which, from the standpoint of Islamic feminism, does not uniformly adhere to an egalitarian understanding of gender. It is essential to clarify that this does not suggest an inherent misogyny within the sacred texts, namely the Qur’an and Hadith. Rather, it highlights the culturally and socially constructed norms that have been historically reinforced and institutionalized through Sharia laws, which are derived from interpretative frameworks of these texts. The Arabo-Islamic culture is viewed as misogynistic, mainly by Arab and Muslim feminists, “due to the conservative interpretations of Islam ... and the strong hold of patriarchy” (Salhi 2013, p. 5). Such interpretations are undertaken mainly by male conservative scholars who imposed their misogyny and patriarchal thoughts on these readings.

### ‘Because-it-may-lead-to-fitna/temptation’ category

This category includes religious men who are called the *Mattawa* in Saudi Arabia. They are visibly identified by their long beards and short *thobes* in imitation of the Prophet. They are religious men who are influenced by the Hanbali school and its modern descendent, the Wahhabiyyah sect following Mohammed ben Abdelwahhab. It denotes an era of Islamic resurgence that commenced around 1979 and has gradually waned since 2016 with the accession of King Salman Bin Abdelaziz and Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman who declared a return to moderate Islam. It is known in Saudi Arabia as *al-Sahwa*, which means awakening. Although this religious movement initially sought to combat superstition and *Bid’ah* (heresy, referring to any innovation or practice not rooted in traditional Muslim practices or Sunnah), it has itself adopted extreme and literal interpretations of the Quran and Hadith.

Only two participants interviewed were *Muttawa*. The shortage in the number of *Mattawa* participants is due to the challenges in accessing individuals willing to discuss topics like women’s inclusion in the labour market. Despite the limited number, their views can be seen as representative of a monolithic perspective, as they conveyed almost identical narratives regarding women’s participation in the workforce. Their narrative emphasizes the tangible boundaries imposed by patriarchal Wahhabi interpretations of religious texts, highlighting how these interpretations shape social norms and practices, particularly in restricting women’s behavior and mobility. They supported their arguments with Suras from the Qur’an and Hadiths.

When asked about women’s inclusion in the labour market, one of the participants responded as follows: *As for mixing, there is nothing wrong with a woman going out to work ... whether in women's shops or separate shops where there is no danger. All of this is acceptable, whether she works as a seamstress, a doctor, or in other types of jobs. God Almighty has legislated that we have the right to seek sustenance, and the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said: ‘Strive for what will benefit you, and seek help from God.’ ... However, it is not permissible for her to be in a place where there is danger among men or where she is not safe because of the men around her. This is because they may bully her. She must not put herself in danger or risk her life. While there is nothing wrong with seeking a job, it is not permissible for her to work in an environment where she is constantly mixing and communicating with men. Her presence among men, even with a veil, is considered a fitna/temptation. Constant and frequent contact, mingling, and sitting together can lead to evil.* (Participant 27, aged 30-40, married, PhD, tribal)

At the core of this belief lies the perspective of the *Mattawa*, who regard a woman’s body as a potential source of *fitna*/temptation. The presence of women alongside men is seen as a potential catalyst for *fitna*, which entails seduction and the violation of invisible rules established by the invisible *hudud*/boundaries. This perspective is rooted in the notion that women are predominantly perceived as sexual beings, and their presence in male-dominated public spaces is often seen as an erotic intrusion. Unlike men, who are recognized for their economic

and political roles, women are viewed primarily through a sexual lens, even when they are engaged in productive activities. Mattawa speak about the danger of *fitna*, emphasizing that since men are primarily created to worship God, they caution against the seduction of women and especially advise against becoming too emotionally attached to them. They stress the importance of giving total love and emotional capacity to Allah, citing the Quranic verse (Surah II: 165) which states that emotional attachment divides a person's heart, and Allah has not created humans with two hearts within their bodies.

Similarly, the second participant, who was a member of the Mattawa community, offered a comparable viewpoint, stating that if a woman's job does not result in *fitna*, then there is no issue with her participation in the labour market. He says: *Islam does not prevent women from working or engaging in trade, as Allah has legislated work for His servants and commanded them to do so. Allah says, 'and say: Do [good]; Allah will see your deeds, and [so, will] His Messenger and the believers' [Quran Surah 9:105]. ... This applies to both men and women. Commerce is ordained for all, and individuals, whether male or female, are instructed to engage in trade. Allah says, 'O you who have believed, do not consume one another's wealth unjustly but only [in lawful] business by mutual consent' [Quran Surah 4:29], and this applies to both men and women. Allah also says, 'And call upon two of your men as witnesses. ... However, it must be noted in work and trade that the interaction between genders should be innocent, free from anything that may cause problems or lead to wrongdoing. Women should work in a manner that avoids mixing with men and causing fitna, while also observing proper hijab, modesty, and avoiding the causes of fitna* (Participant 28, aged 30-40, married, a Mosque's Imam, tribal).

The decision regarding where a woman should work is influenced not only by her physical presence but also by her voice. When questioned about his opinion regarding women working as singers, participant 27 declined to support it. When asked if his refusal stemmed from considering women's voices as *'awrah* (something to be concealed), he responded as follows: "The voice of a woman is not considered *'awrah* (something to be concealed). The Prophet (peace be upon him) heard women speaking, as did the companions, and women used to ask the Prophet (peace be upon him) questions, which he and the companions would hear. They even requested a gathering with the Prophet (peace be upon him), and he convened with them. Therefore, a woman can inquire about religious rulings from men, seek clarification on matters that confuse her, and engage in legal disputes by either accusing or being accused. However, women are prohibited from speaking in a submissive manner out of reverence and politeness. As Allah says: 'And do not be soft in speech [to men], lest he in whose heart is disease should covet, but speak with appropriate speech' (Quran, Surah Al-Ahzab, 33:32)."

According to this classification, a woman's voice, especially when it carries a feminine and alluring tone, is considered a risk as it could incite *fitna*. There is a concern that a man might become enamored or emotionally drawn to her if she speaks in such a manner.

The settings where a woman can perform or work are determined by the perceptions of her body and voice. Religious men often fear women's *bodies* and *voices*, as they believe these elements have the potential to cause *fitna*, which involves directing love towards a woman when one's heart and affection should be solely for God.

Likewise, other participants who decline gender-mixed jobs provide similar responses: *I firmly oppose my wife working, whether in mixed or non-mixed environments. ... Her primary responsibility should be caring for her family. ... If I am unable to provide financially, she can consider working at that point. ... However, her priority must always be taking care of our children.* (Participant 10, 24 years, married, tribal)

Tribal men, traditionally seen as the primary providers for their families, advocate against women entering the workforce, citing their own ability to financially support both themselves and their families. This perspective is informed by the religious concept of *qiwamah*, derived from the Qur'an, specifically verse 34 of sura Al Nisa. This verse emphasizes men's responsibility to "spend of their property for the support of women" (Wadud, 1999, p. 70). This intersection of gender and religion is evident in the societal expectation that men fulfill the role of financial providers, thus influencing perceptions of women's participation in the workforce.

The Mattawa's perspective exemplifies how the intersection of gender and religion enforces visible boundaries that limit women's labour market participation, reflecting patriarchal interpretations of sacred texts. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the existence of an alternative perspective grounded in a distinct interpretation of religious teachings.

### The 'it-is-normal' category

This group comprises Saudi men who are tribal, devout Muslims, well-educated, and have adopted a relaxed and open lifestyle through their experiences of traveling and living abroad for periods of time. When asked whether they approve of women working in mixed-gender environments, they responded with confidence: "*It is normal.*" Responses like the following are indicative of such attitudes: *Yes, it is normal. I accept mixed-gender jobs. If the woman is respectful, nothing will happen to her. If she is not, even if you put her between four walls, she will do whatever pleases her.* (Participant 4, aged 20-30, married, tribal).

Similar answers appear in the following: “Yes, it is normal. I have no problem with mixed-gender jobs. There are new government rules set against behavioral aggression or harassment if people are afraid of that” (Participant 13, aged 30-40, married, PhD, tribal).

When asked about addressing the persistent social norm of non-gender mixing, despite government regulations and significant progress towards including women in the labour market, some participants suggested that change could come with time. Participant 13 noted that the government’s initiatives to encourage gender mixing are being implemented through changes in school environments. He said:

*The governmental plan now is to allow gender mixing in schools up to the sixth grade in primary schools. Currently, it is allowed up to the fourth grade. Additionally, there are some revisions of several fatawa (religious interpretations). I think the real problem, however, is how to shatter these invisible boundaries between men and women. From the beginning, there has been no mixing, which is why there is a psychological blockage.*

Participant 4 proposed that the solution is to imitate the era of the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia, when the Prophet included women in all affairs, namely in wars and invasions. He said: “Didn’t women use to accompany the Prophet to invasions and wars? Women are indeed the sisters of men.” In fact, these last two narratives transition us to the next section of this research, which aims to propose Islamic feminism that may offer suggestions on how to make gender mixing and women’s full inclusion in the marketplace acceptable to society.

### **Eradicating inequality through Islamic feminism**

Delving into the study of gender within Islam entails an examination of the roles and duties prescribed for both men and women in the foundational sources of Islamic knowledge: the Qur’an and the Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) (Hamadeh, 1996, p. 331). As these texts are considered the sole legitimate authorities for Islamic law (Sharia) within the Muslim community (Umma), Islamic feminists engage in critical readings of them to uncover and analyze the authentic understanding of gender in Islam. This exploration forms the cornerstone of their agenda and informs their strategic approaches.

From the perspective of Islamic feminists, Islam is viewed not as a gender-specific doctrine, but rather as a comprehensive belief system and lifestyle that extends equally to both women and men (Cooke 2001, xiv). Leila Ahmed (1992) underscores the egalitarian nature of gender within Islam (63). Similarly, Amina Wadud (1999) emphasizes Islam’s egalitarian stance on gender, asserting that within Islam, women are intended to be considered fully human in all aspects—primordially, cosmologically, eschatologically, spiritually, and morally—equal to all believers of Allah, Muhammad, and Islam (x). To elucidate this viewpoint, one may turn to Wadud’s text, which extensively elucidates the egalitarian understanding of gender through her Qur’anic interpretation.

The egalitarian conception of gender, prominently highlighted in the Qur’an, serves as a foundational principle underpinning Islamic Feminism, a perspective embraced by numerous activists within this framework. May Yamani (1996), in her introduction to *Feminism and Islam*, underscores this principle by asserting that “in the Qur’an, male and female Muslims are equal in faith and dignity” (22). Similarly, Najla Hamadeh (1996), in her article “Islamic Family Legislation,” acknowledges “the egalitarian and sensibly moderate spirit of ... the Qur’an” (331). Leila Ahmed (1992) further emphasizes this egalitarian ethos, noting that it is “embedded in the new ethical and spiritual field of meaning that the religion had come into existence to articulate.” She underscores the Qur’an’s explicit address to women as a testament to this egalitarianism (63).

Indeed, Islamic feminists consistently emphasize the egalitarian dimension of gender within the sacred text, although an exhaustive list of their perspectives cannot be provided here. However, it is crucial to delve also into their interpretations of the Sunnah, especially the Hadith of the Prophet, which offers insights into the broader Muslim context of seventh-century Arabia and its implications for the perception of women.

One of the most significant contributions to the understanding of women’s rights within the Islamic tradition is Fatima Mernissi’s book, *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991). The Sunnah, representing the tradition of the Prophet, is documented in written form known as the Hadith, providing detailed accounts of the Prophet’s words and actions. This tradition, alongside the Qur’an, forms the foundation of religious knowledge (fiqh) for Muslims, guiding their understanding of Islam and informing the content of Sharia, or Islamic law. Mernissi’s work illuminates the significance of the Sunnah in shaping perceptions and practices related to women’s rights within the Islamic framework.

Islamic feminists are deeply engaged in interpreting the foundational sources of Islam, emphasizing that women’s inequality is socially rather than religiously constructed and that Islamic scriptures should be reinterpreted in ways that advance women’s interests (Kaymaz Mert, 2025), reflecting a pressing need to assume a more active role in this endeavor. This project of interpretation involves revisiting and reinterpreting the Qur’an and the Sunnah, driven by a desire to challenge the gendered nature of Islamic epistemology (Cooke 2001, xii). By critiquing Islamic hermeneutics, they aim to ensure that Muslim women are granted the same rights as men to fully participate in a just community (Cooke, 2001, p. 61). This endeavor represents a significant departure from traditional norms,

which have historically excluded women from the discursive and hermeneutical spaces within religion (Cooke 2001, iii-xiii).

Regarding conservative understanding of the Qur'an, Amina Wadud (1999) explains that it is influenced by patriarchal thoughts and traditional perceptions of women. In this regard, she proclaims: "If readers of the Qur'an have assumed in any manner that men are superior to women intellectually, spiritually, ontologically, etc.; that men are 'in charge of women'; that men have a more significant role in the continuation of society; that men are natural leaders; that men should 'rule' the family and get obedience from women; that women do not have to participate and contribute in order to maintain the family and society or that her participation is marginal; then those readers will interpret the Qur'an in accordance with those assumptions" (96).

To put it differently, if an individual reading the Qur'an holds certain preexisting notions or biases concerning the social status of men and women, they might tend to interpret the text in a manner that strengthens those convictions.

The project of Islamic feminists to reinterpret the Qur'an and Hadith aligns with a notable speech by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. On April 25, 2021, in an interview with "*Al-Arabiya*," the Crown Prince advocated for basing the constitution and laws on the Qur'an, while excluding many Hadiths (sayings of the Prophet). He stressed the necessity for a modern "interpretation" of the Qur'an, indicating a significant ideological shift away from Wahhabism. He asserted:

If Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdulwahhab were with us today and he found us committed blindly to his texts and closing our minds to interpretation and jurisprudence while deifying and sanctifying him, he would be the first to object to this. There are no fixed schools of thought, and there is no infallible person. We should engage in continuous interpretation of Quranic texts, and the same goes for the sunnah of the Prophet PBUH, and all fatwas should be based on the time, place, and mindset in which they are issued. For example, 100 years ago, when a scholar would issue a certain fatwah not knowing that the Earth was round and not knowing about continents or technology, etc., that fatwah would have been based on the then-available inputs and information and their understanding of the Quran and Sunnah, but these things change over time and are different right now. (<https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Mohammed-Bin-Salman-attempts-to-reform-Islam-53085.html>)

One strategy undertaken by Islamic feminists is also debunking contradictions. To use Lamrabat's words (2016), re-interpretations should highlight "the real contradiction which exists between the spiritual message of the Qur'an and the lived reality of Muslims" (3). In other words, these contradictions do not reflect a reality Islam emphasized or tried to establish.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study could have been more comprehensive if it had included female experiences and perspectives on labour market inclusion. However, due to the limitations of the research paper's length, the author restricts the analysis to the views of male participants, which are deemed sufficient to provide a substantial understanding of the tribal thought. Future research, however, may delve deeper by incorporating female participants to examine how they reflect patriarchal social views.

This paper may be perceived as a re-Orientalist narrative. However, as Mohja Kahf (2011) asserts, "[r]eal Muslim sexism, like Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, secular, and other sexism, exists" (p. 11). This suggests that discussing gender discrimination in Saudi Arabia does not constitute a re-Orientalist portrayal but rather an engagement with its realities. There is a clear distinction between Western Orientalist representations of Muslim women and the actual conditions of Saudi women, even when addressing discrimination. Employing intersectionality to analyze the interplay of gender, tribal identity, and religion in shaping discrimination does not imply that tribal and Islamic cultures are monolithic or inherently misogynistic.

## DISCUSSION

Applying an intersectional framework to examine the complex factors affecting gender disparity in Saudi Arabia's employment sector, alongside the use of interviews, was pivotal in thoroughly elucidating the nuances of gender inequality (Al-Hinai et al., 2025; Webb, 2026). The results of this paper make significant contributions to both theoretical understanding and empirical research in various respects.

Firstly, this research demonstrates the applicability of intersectionality in the context of Saudi Arabia, illustrating how it can elucidate the hidden factors that intersect to create invisible rules (Can & Soyly, 2025). These rules often complicate labour market inclusion, particularly for women living in small cities and belonging to Bedouin tribes. Essentially, Saudi women, due to the social norm of non-gender mixing—which leads to gender inequality in the labour market—experience a form of discrimination that can be termed *tribal sexism*. This discrimination results from a prolonged process of gendering, influenced by various ideologies, historical events, and mindsets.

Second, this research shows that the intersectionality of gender and tribal identity often results in distinct social tribal groups with varying views on gender mixing, ranging from absolute refusal to total acceptance of women working in mixed-gender settings (Acar et al., 2025). The study through the use of interviews identifies four categories of tribal thinking. The first category consists of individuals who completely reject gender mixing. The second category includes those who accept gender mixing in the labour market, but only for government jobs. The third category, which includes religious men, opposes gender mixing due to the belief that it may lead to *fitna*/temptation. The fourth category comprises individuals who fully accept gender mixing without any objections. The tribal thought is *not* therefore monolithic.

Third, the study also highlights that the tribal norms of *ayb* and *'ar*, which underpin the rejection of gender mixing in the labour market, have historical roots and should be understood within that context (Delgado et al., 2025). The concepts of *ayb* and *'ar* originate from the pre-Islamic Jahiliya period, a time characterized by ongoing tribal conflicts where women were frequently taken as hostages and used as instruments of war. This situation led to the practice of *n'ad*, which Islam ultimately abolished. However, the notions of *ayb* and *'ar* have persisted.

Fourth, the study of the intersectionality of gender and religion indicates that Muslim sexism opposing gender mixing is shaped by traditionalist interpretations of Islam. It explains how religious patriarchal views regarding women's bodies and voices can lead to the rejection of gender mixing in the labour market due to fears of *fitna*/temptation (Brown et al., 2022). Islamic feminism therefore underscores that gender inequality in the Saudi labour market cannot be adequately examined without addressing the religious dimension—particularly the patriarchal interpretations of Islam that sustain such inequality. Furthermore, it demonstrates that any viable solution to this issue must engage with Islamic feminist readings of Islam, which converge with the views of certain tribal men who argue that gender segregation—the principal intersection generating inequality—is not inherently Islamic. Ultimately, Islamic feminism concludes that the most effective model for reform lies in returning to the early Islamic era, when the Prophet granted women significant social and public roles, a historical precedent that resonates with the reformist perspectives expressed by these men.

One major contribution of this research paper also indicates that adopting Islamic feminism as a framework aligns with Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's Vision 2030, which advocates for reinterpreting both the Qur'an and Hadith. A key finding in this context is that the Saudi government's efforts to advance and empower women, known as the Tamkeen project, face significant challenges. Critics of these efforts should recognize the intersectionality of various factors, which, while not making the task impossible, do slow progress a little. The project must navigate diverse backgrounds and ideologies deeply rooted in tribal identity and religious influences, both socially and historically.

While Vision 2030 has introduced progressive reforms, this study underscores that cultural and religious norms continue to pose deeper barriers than policy measures. True transformation requires cultural re-education and theological reinterpretation alongside institutional change. Therefore, the findings of this paper have practical implications for policymakers and organizations seeking to improve women's participation in the labour force in Saudi Arabia. While researchers like AlRabiah and AlHadithi (2018) propose that eradicating gender inequality could be facilitated through conferences, media, and highlighting successful women leaders, this paper suggests that a more effective solution involves addressing the material conditions of tribal and religious *discourses* on gender by revisiting the past, specifically seventh-century Arabia, where women gathered around the Prophet and enjoyed equal rights with men. Islamic feminism could be one crucial tool, among many, in this effort. This framework could be integrated into university curricula within departments of Islamic culture and Arabic language and literature, among others.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study offers a threefold contribution. Empirically, it provides rare insights into how Bedouin men in Northern Saudi Arabia conceptualize women's work and gender mixing, revealing the deep entanglement of tribal identity, religion, and social norms. Theoretically, it advances the use of intersectionality and Islamic feminism to expose the multilayered structures of gender inequality and to challenge monolithic interpretations of Islam that perpetuate patriarchal constraints. Practically, it underscores the need for culturally grounded reforms aligned with Vision 2030 that address the socio-religious roots of exclusion, rather than relying solely on policy shifts. Future research should extend this inquiry to include Saudi women's perspectives and conduct comparative studies across regions and social groups to further illuminate how intersectional and religious dynamics shape gendered labour experiences.

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## Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

## Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and writing of this manuscript.

## Data availability

The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality considerations.

## AI disclosure

No generative artificial intelligence tools were used in the research or preparation of this manuscript.

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