

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Role of Saudi Women in Advancing Cultural Sustainability and Sustainable Development

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## ABSTRACT

Situated within the transformative context of Saudi Vision 2030, this qualitative study examines how Saudi women perceive and enact their role in advancing cultural sustainability and multidimensional sustainable development. Drawing on a phenomenological approach, the research explores women's lived experiences of social transformation and their interpretation of empowerment within cultural, economic, and environmental domains. Data were generated through 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in the Al Qassim region and analyzed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method supported by Atlas.ti 8. The findings reveal that empowerment is experienced not solely as expanded rights or economic participation, but as a culturally embedded process integrating independence with moral responsibility. Cultural change is perceived as adaptive continuity rather than rupture, with women negotiating expanded opportunities while maintaining core social values. Material independence and professional engagement function as catalysts for broader social and environmental influence, particularly through intergenerational transmission. Environmental consciousness, in turn, is framed as an ethical obligation toward future generations. By demonstrating the interdependence of cultural, economic, social, and environmental sustainability within women's lived experiences, the study advances theoretical discussions on culturally grounded empowerment and integrative sustainability. It contributes to emerging scholarship in the Gulf region by positioning Saudi women as central agents of adaptive transformation rather than passive beneficiaries of reform. The findings offer policy-relevant insights for strengthening gender-responsive development strategies that align institutional reform with culturally embedded agency. **Keywords:** cultural sustainability; Saudi women; sustainable development; cultural transformation; feminist sustainability framework.

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## 1. Introduction

Culture constitutes a foundational pillar of any society, embodying the values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape collective identity and guide everyday life <sup>[1]</sup>. Rather than being a static heritage, culture functions as a dynamic system of meaning that structures social continuity while enabling societal evolution <sup>[2]</sup>. Through its influence on behavior, institutions, and developmental trajectories, culture shapes both individual aspirations and collective futures <sup>[3]</sup>. Sihite and Sumantri <sup>[4]</sup> argue that the interaction between values and behavior generates orientations that influence engagement in social and economic development processes.

Within this perspective emerges the concept of cultural sustainability, which refers to the continuity, adaptation, and intergenerational transmission of cultural capital <sup>[5]</sup>. Cultural sustainability emphasizes both preservation and innovation, ensuring that cultural values remain meaningful while societies respond to contemporary challenges <sup>[6]</sup>. In practical terms, this sustainability often emerges through a continuous balancing process between cultural continuity and social innovation, allowing traditions to be maintained while being reinterpreted in response to changing societal conditions <sup>[7]</sup>. Sustainable development, therefore, cannot be understood solely in economic or environmental terms; it is also culturally grounded, shaped by social meanings and lived experiences <sup>[8]</sup>.

Feminist and development scholarship further highlights the importance of agency in shaping cultural continuity. The “Women, Culture and Development” (WCD) paradigm proposed by Chua et al. <sup>[9]</sup> conceptualizes culture as lived experience and centers women’s agency within development processes. This framework recognizes the interconnection between production and reproduction in women’s lives and positions women not merely as beneficiaries of reform but as active contributors to cultural transformation. Such a perspective is particularly relevant when examining contexts undergoing rapid socio-cultural change.

Saudi Arabia provides a compelling setting for exploring this nexus. In recent years, the country has experienced significant structural and social reforms associated with its national transformation agenda, particularly under Vision 2030. Women’s participation in education, employment, and public life has expanded considerably <sup>[10]</sup>. Nevertheless, earlier studies have documented structural constraints, low occupational participation rates, and persistent cultural barriers affecting women’s advancement <sup>[11,12]</sup>. Scholars such as Al-Rasheed <sup>[13]</sup> and Sidani and Al Hakim <sup>[14]</sup> emphasize that the Saudi case requires context-specific analysis due to its distinct socio-cultural and institutional characteristics.

While existing research has largely focused on structural barriers and labor market participation, comparatively limited attention has been given to how Saudi women themselves interpret their evolving role in shaping cultural sustainability within the broader transformation context. Previous literature often characterizes women as constrained by traditional roles <sup>[15]</sup>, although alternative interpretations suggest that certain social norms may also reflect culturally embedded values and negotiated meanings <sup>[16]</sup>. This complexity highlights the need to move beyond binary narratives of restriction versus liberation and toward an analysis grounded in women’s lived experiences. Cultural factors influencing women’s advancement have been noted <sup>[17,18]</sup>, yet the ways in which women actively contribute to sustainable cultural transformation remain underexplored.

Accordingly, this study seeks to reposition Saudi women as proactive agents of cultural sustainability. It investigates how women navigate adaptive cultural change while preserving core values, and how their evolving identities reinforce social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. By integrating empowerment perspectives with cultural sustainability theory, the research contributes context-specific qualitative evidence that reframes women’s role within national transformation processes.

The paper proceeds by clarifying the conceptual foundations of cultural sustainability and its linkage to sustainable development. It then presents the research methodology and empirical findings, followed by a discussion of theoretical and practical implications. The study concludes by outlining how culturally grounded empowerment can contribute to long-term sustainable development in the Saudi context.

## **2. Literature Review**

Literature on women's empowerment and sustainable development has expanded considerably; however, these strands of scholarship often remain analytically separated. Studies on Saudi women primarily focus on structural constraints and participation rates, while sustainability research frequently addresses cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions without adequately integrating gendered agency within specific socio-cultural contexts. This section therefore synthesizes these intersecting bodies of literature to establish a conceptual foundation for examining Saudi women not only as participants in reform, but as agents of cultural sustainability operating across multiple dimensions of sustainable transformation.

### **2.1. Women's Advancement in Saudi Arabia**

Saudi women's advancement over recent decades reflects a complex and uneven process shaped by the interplay of structural reform, cultural negotiation, and institutional adaptation <sup>[19]</sup>. While increased participation in education, employment, and public life signals tangible progress, scholarship consistently demonstrates that such advancement has unfolded within persistent socio-cultural constraints <sup>[20]</sup>. Education has frequently been positioned as the foundational driver of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia <sup>[21]</sup>. Al alhareth et al. <sup>[22]</sup> conceptualize educational access as a critical step in the emancipation process, yet their analysis also reveals enduring disparities in quality, scope, and equality of access. This duality suggests that education functions both as an instrument of mobility and as a site where structural inequalities remain embedded. Thus, educational reform alone does not automatically translate into transformative empowerment; rather, it creates conditions of possibility that require supportive institutional and cultural frameworks <sup>[23]</sup>.

Within the broader context of Vision 2030, women's participation has been formally encouraged as part of national development objectives <sup>[21]</sup>. However, empirical evidence indicates that institutional ambition does not always correspond to lived experience. Omair et al. <sup>[24]</sup> observe that women's engagement in development initiatives remains below projected expectations, highlighting a gap between policy discourse and social integration mechanisms. Similarly, Al-bakr et al. <sup>[25]</sup> identify shifting attitudes toward gender equality in higher education, yet they also document ongoing resistance rooted in conservative perceptions. Al-bakr <sup>[25]</sup> interprets this tension as indicative of gradual cultural recalibration rather than abrupt transformation. Collectively, these studies point to a transitional phase in which reform coexists with normative negotiation.

Workplace integration further illustrates the complexity of this transition. Through qualitative inquiry, Al-Asfour et al. <sup>[26]</sup> identify structural barriers including gender stereotyping, discrimination, restricted advancement pathways, and challenges associated with mobility and work-life balance. Varshney <sup>[27]</sup> corroborates these findings, arguing that progress in workplace equality has been incremental rather than systemic. The persistence of career interruptions related to childcare and family responsibilities underscores the intersection between public participation and private obligations, revealing that empowerment cannot be assessed solely through access indicators but must also account for sustainability of participation <sup>[28]</sup>.

In this vein, existing scholarship demonstrates that Saudi women's advancement cannot be reduced to a linear narrative of liberation or restriction. Instead, it reflects an evolving negotiation between reform-

oriented institutional change and culturally embedded social expectations. While significant gains have been achieved in education and employment, structural adaptation remains incomplete. Importantly, much of this literature emphasizes constraints and participation rates, with comparatively limited attention to how women themselves interpret and enact their evolving roles within broader processes of cultural sustainability. This gap provides a critical entry point for the present study.

## **2.2. A Quadruple Approach to Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development is increasingly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cultural, social, economic, and environmental sustainability [29]. While early sustainability discourse privileged economic growth and environmental protection, contemporary scholarship recognizes that cultural and social dimensions are equally foundational [30]. Treating these pillars as analytically separate risks overlooking the dynamic interdependence through which transformation unfolds [28]. A quadruple framework therefore provides a more integrative lens for understanding how agency operates across interconnected domains [31].

Cultural sustainability, which constitutes the conceptual anchor of this study, concerns the preservation, adaptation, and meaningful transmission of cultural values over time. Laine [32] conceptualizes this process across micro, median, and macro levels, demonstrating that cultural continuity operates simultaneously through identity formation, communal awareness, and broader societal narratives. Kosanovic et al. [33] further argue that culturally sustainable communities combine resilience with openness to innovation, suggesting that sustainability requires adaptive continuity rather than rigid preservation. Within this perspective, culture functions not as a passive backdrop but as an active framework shaping developmental choices [34].

Social sustainability complements this dimension by foregrounding equity, safety, and inclusive participation [35]. Equity involves addressing historical imbalances and expanding recognition to previously marginalized identities, while safety encompasses both protection from harm and proactive strategies that enable adaptive resilience [36]. In contexts undergoing rapid reform, such as Saudi Arabia, social sustainability becomes inseparable from gender inclusion, as expanding women's participation directly influences patterns of representation, institutional access, and collective well-being [19].

Economic sustainability extends beyond short-term growth indicators to encompass development strategies that maintain balance among cultural, social, and environmental systems [37]. Within reform-oriented national frameworks, sustainable economic policy must reconcile productivity with social inclusion and cultural preservation [38]. Economic participation, therefore, cannot be assessed solely through labor market statistics; it must also be evaluated in terms of its long-term contribution to social cohesion and cultural continuity [39].

Environmental sustainability adds a further layer, emphasizing ecological responsibility amid accelerating industrialization [40]. Stojanovic et al. [41], through structural equation modelling, demonstrate that substantive environmental practices enhance organizational performance, underscoring sustainability's strategic value beyond symbolic compliance. Environmental responsibility, however, is not merely institutional; it is also enacted at household and community levels, where cultural norms shape behavioral patterns [42].

Base on the above, these four dimensions do not operate independently. Cultural values inform social inclusion, social equity shapes economic participation, economic structures influence environmental choices, and environmental awareness feeds back into cultural identity. Positioning women within this quadruple framework enables a more comprehensive understanding of their transformative capacity. Rather than limiting analysis to isolated indicators—such as employment rates or educational attainment—this

integrative model highlights how women's agency may simultaneously influence cultural continuity, social equity, economic vitality, and environmental responsibility. This conceptual integration provides the theoretical architecture for examining Saudi women as agents of culturally grounded sustainable development.

### **2.2.1. Cultural Sustainability and Gender Equality**

Gender equality has increasingly been positioned as a normative and structural prerequisite for sustainable development [43]. Beyond its ethical dimension, scholarship frames women's empowerment as a systemic driver of resilience and long-term societal continuity. UN Women [44] emphasize that the realization of women's rights is not an auxiliary objective but a foundational condition for sustainable outcomes across multiple domains. In this sense, gender equality operates not only as a social aspiration but as an enabling mechanism that strengthens institutional legitimacy and intergenerational stability [45].

From a cultural sustainability perspective, Pathania [46] argues that equitable access to education, rights, and social recognition reinforces cultural resilience by broadening participation in value transmission and social production. Importantly, Pathania [46] distinguishes between equality—concerned with equal starting conditions—and equity—focused on ensuring fair access to opportunities and benefits. This distinction aligns with the equity dimension articulated by Eizenberg and Jabareen [35], where social sustainability depends on correcting structural imbalances rather than merely formalizing equal treatment. Within culturally embedded societies, such differentiation becomes crucial, as empowerment often unfolds through negotiated inclusion rather than abrupt structural replacement [28].

Duxbury et al. [47] and Segnestam [48] further conceptualize women's empowerment as intrinsic to cultural sustainability, positioning gender inclusion as both outcome and process of sustainable transformation. They also capture this shift through the transition from “bread maker to bread winner,” symbolizing changing socio-economic identities and expanded spheres of agency. However, these transformations frequently coexist with normative contestation. As Al-bakr [25] demonstrates, evolving attitudes toward women's participation in education and public life are accompanied by ongoing debates regarding traditional gender roles. Such tensions suggest that cultural sustainability is not synonymous with cultural uniformity; rather, it entails adaptive reinterpretation of roles within existing value systems [49].

In the Saudi context, expanding educational and professional participation reflects measurable movement toward equity [50]. Yet the literature largely evaluates this progress through institutional indicators, leaving comparatively underexplored how women themselves experience and negotiate this evolving balance between continuity and change. Understanding gender equality as a culturally embedded process—rather than solely a structural benchmark—therefore becomes essential for examining women's role in sustaining and reshaping cultural identity [51].

### **2.2.2. Economic Sustainability and Women's Empowerment**

Economic sustainability extends beyond aggregate growth indicators to encompass inclusive development patterns capable of maintaining long-term social and institutional balance [52]. Within this framework, women's empowerment is frequently conceptualized as both a driver and an outcome of economic transformation. Bhoganadam [53] describes this relationship as reciprocal: economic expansion can reduce gender disparities by generating employment opportunities, while women's participation in the labor market simultaneously stimulates productivity, innovation, and household consumption. This bidirectional dynamic positions gender inclusion as structurally embedded within sustainable economic systems rather than as an external social objective [28].

Boserup et al. <sup>[54]</sup> further highlight women's problem-solving capacities and their contribution to diversified economic activity, emphasizing that women's integration into productive sectors enhances adaptive capacity within changing markets. de Haan <sup>[55]</sup> similarly argues that women's economic empowerment reinforces economic sustainability, though such reinforcement remains contingent upon equitable access to education, training, and career progression pathways. These findings suggest that empowerment cannot be reduced to labor force entry alone; it requires institutional arrangements that sustain participation over time.

At the macroeconomic level, demographic and structural factors complicate this relationship. Kleven and Landais <sup>[56]</sup> identify fertility patterns as a significant determinant of gender gaps in economic participation, illustrating how caregiving responsibilities intersect with career continuity. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund <sup>[57]</sup> underscores the broader macroeconomic gains associated with narrowing gender disparities, despite persistent global inequalities in wages and unpaid labor distribution. These analyses collectively demonstrate that economic sustainability is strengthened when structural barriers to women's participation are addressed, but weakened when caregiving burdens and discriminatory practices remain unresolved.

Within reform-oriented contexts, such as Saudi Arabia, women's economic participation assumes additional strategic importance as part of diversification and national development agendas <sup>[58]</sup>. However, existing literature predominantly evaluates empowerment through participation rates and macroeconomic outcomes. Less attention has been directed toward how economic agency intersects with cultural identity, social norms, and long-term sustainability narratives. Integrating these dimensions is therefore essential for understanding women's economic empowerment not merely as a growth instrument, but as a transformative process embedded within broader systems of cultural and social continuity.

### **2.2.3. Social Sustainability and Transformative Agency**

Social sustainability concerns the capacity of societies to maintain cohesion, equity, and well-being across time while adapting to structural and demographic change <sup>[59]</sup>. Unlike purely economic or environmental indicators, social sustainability emphasizes relational dynamics—how identities, institutions, and power structures evolve through collective interaction <sup>[60]</sup>. Within this dimension, women's agency becomes central not only as a matter of representation but as a catalyst of qualitative social transformation <sup>[61]</sup>.

Empirical research links women's participation to improved well-being and enhanced quality of life at household and community levels <sup>[62,63]</sup>. Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi <sup>[64]</sup> and Salehi et al. <sup>[65]</sup> further argue that empowerment strategies contribute to broader patterns of social inclusion and stability. However, such contributions are not automatic; they depend on the interaction between structural opportunities and individual capacity.

Giele <sup>[66]</sup> conceptualizes women as agents of social transformation operating across internal and external dimensions. Internally, transformation involves self-definition, autonomy, and cognitive reframing. Externally, it unfolds within institutional and cultural environments that either constrain or enable agency. Giele <sup>[66]</sup> identifies four interrelated stages of change, highlighting that sustainable transformation requires alignment between personal development and structural reform. This dual-level perspective underscores that social sustainability is neither solely policy-driven nor purely individualistic; it emerges from their interaction <sup>[28]</sup>.

Extending this framework, Mejiuni and Ebrary <sup>[67]</sup> introduce the concept of transformational learning, whereby women's everyday practices generate shifts in identity and social meaning through informal processes. Even in contexts characterized by normative constraints, gradual cognitive and behavioral shifts

can accumulate into broader societal adaptation. This perspective challenges binary narratives of resistance versus compliance, suggesting instead that social change often occurs incrementally through negotiated participation.

#### **2.2.4. Environmental Sustainability and Women's Agency**

Environmental sustainability has emerged as an urgent pillar of sustainable development in light of accelerating ecological degradation and resource depletion <sup>[68]</sup>. While environmental governance is often framed at institutional and policy levels, a growing body of literature highlights the critical role of gendered agency in shaping environmental outcomes <sup>[69]</sup>. Women's participation in environmental management is not merely symbolic; it frequently influences adaptive capacity, community resilience, and long-term stewardship practices <sup>[70]</sup>.

Agarwal <sup>[71]</sup> argues that women often demonstrate adaptive flexibility in responding to environmental challenges, particularly in resource-dependent settings. This adaptive orientation positions women as pragmatic actors capable of navigating ecological constraints through collective strategies. Asteria et al. <sup>[72, 73]</sup> further expand this perspective by emphasizing women's dual role as both participants and communicators in environmental security and conflict resolution processes. Rohr <sup>[74]</sup> similarly advocates incorporating gender perspectives into environmental governance frameworks, underscoring that inclusive participation enhances policy responsiveness and legitimacy.

At the global policy level, the United Nations Development Programme <sup>[75]</sup> reinforces the linkage between women's empowerment and environmental protection, calling for increased female representation in sustainability initiatives. Warren's <sup>[76]</sup> ecofeminist framework adds a normative dimension by connecting feminist theory with ecological ethics, arguing that women's historical experiences with marginalization may cultivate heightened environmental sensitivity. However, environmental agency extends beyond philosophical positioning; it is enacted through everyday practices <sup>[28]</sup>.

Ellis <sup>[77]</sup> highlights the importance of household-level environmental responsibility, illustrating how domestic practices contribute to broader ecological outcomes. Malone <sup>[78]</sup> and Dankelman et al. <sup>[79]</sup> further demonstrate women's capacity to mobilize communities and lead pro-environmental initiatives, particularly during environmental crises. These findings suggest that environmental sustainability operates simultaneously at institutional, community, and household levels, with women frequently occupying mediating positions across these spheres.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenological approach to explore Saudi women's lived experiences in relation to cultural, social, economic, and environmental transformation. A qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research objective, which seeks to understand meanings, perceptions, and subjective experiences rather than to measure predefined variables. Phenomenology provides a methodological framework for examining how individuals make sense of their lived realities within specific socio-cultural contexts. By focusing on experience as consciously perceived and articulated, this approach enables the identification of essential structures underlying participants' interpretations of social change. In this study, phenomenology is employed not to construct individual life histories, but to distill shared meaning structures across participants' narratives concerning empowerment and sustainability.

To guide data interpretation, the study utilizes the descriptive phenomenological method proposed by Giorgi <sup>[80]</sup>. Giorgi's <sup>[80]</sup> framework emphasizes systematic transformation of raw descriptions into meaning units and thematic structures while remaining grounded in participants' original accounts. This method was selected due to its rigor in maintaining fidelity to lived experience while allowing analytical synthesis across cases. By applying this structured procedure, the study aims to capture the essence of women's perceived roles within ongoing national transformation processes without imposing external theoretical assumptions prematurely.

### **3.2. Research Context and Population**

The study was conducted in the Al Qassim region of Saudi Arabia. Al Qassim represents a socially and economically significant region characterized by both strong cultural traditions and increasing participation in national development initiatives. This combination makes it a relevant setting for examining how women negotiate evolving roles within a context that reflects both continuity and reform. According to 2017 demographic statistics, the region had an estimated population of approximately 2.03 million inhabitants, of whom nearly 49.4% were female. Beyond its demographic composition, Al Qassim offers a meaningful socio-cultural context for exploring women's lived experiences of transformation. As a region where traditional norms coexist with expanding educational and professional opportunities, it provides insight into how empowerment unfolds within culturally embedded environments rather than exclusively metropolitan or highly globalized settings. Studying women in this regional context allows for the examination of adaptive cultural negotiation rather than purely urban-driven change. Given the study's focus on cultural sustainability and intergenerational value transmission, selecting a context that reflects both preservation of tradition and engagement with reform enhances the analytical depth of the findings.

### **3.3. Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants capable of providing rich, experience-based insights aligned with the phenomenological orientation of the study. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the objective was not statistical representativeness, but depth of understanding regarding women's lived experiences of social and cultural transformation. In phenomenological research, the aim of sampling is to capture detailed lived experiences rather than to achieve statistical generalization to a wider population. A total of twenty-five Saudi women participated in the study. This number was deemed sufficient to allow thematic depth while maintaining analytical manageability consistent with phenomenological research standards. Accordingly, the sample size was determined based on qualitative research principles emphasizing experiential richness and thematic saturation rather than numerical representativeness. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was observed, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantively new experiential insights.

Participants were selected according to predefined inclusion criteria. Each participant was required to (1) be actively employed in a stable professional role and (2) possess a minimum of five years of work experience. These criteria were established to ensure that participants had sustained exposure to institutional environments and societal shifts associated with recent national reforms. By focusing on women with established professional trajectories, the study sought to capture reflective accounts shaped by both pre-reform and reform-period experiences. Consequently, the sample represents a group of professionally active women who are directly engaged with the evolving social and institutional landscape associated with national development reforms. The study therefore aims to explore how this particular group interprets and experiences cultural and developmental transformation, rather than to claim that their perspectives represent all Saudi women.

Participants ranged in age from 27 to 45 years, representing early- and mid-career stages. Educational background was also considered, as educational attainment may influence awareness, interpretive capacity, and engagement with sustainability-related discourses. Additional demographic characteristics were informed by criteria outlined by Salehi et al. [65], including education level, occupation, marital status, parental status, and number of children. Incorporating variation across these dimensions enhanced the heterogeneity of the sample and strengthened credibility by capturing diverse perspectives across family structures and professional contexts. This diversity within the selected participant group helped ensure that multiple viewpoints were reflected within the sample while maintaining the depth-oriented focus of phenomenological inquiry.

The recruitment process relied on professional networks and voluntary participation. Participants were approached through personal and institutional contacts and provided informed consent prior to participation. This approach facilitated access to experienced professionals while ensuring ethical engagement.

### **3.4. Data Collection Procedures**

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit reflective accounts of participants' lived experiences. The semi-structured format allowed for a balance between conceptual consistency and exploratory flexibility, ensuring that core themes related to cultural, social, economic, and environmental transformation were addressed while allowing participants to articulate their perspectives in their own terms. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted at a mutually agreed time and location that ensured privacy and comfort. Interviews continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which successive interviews yielded repetition rather than novel experiential insights [81]. Saturation was observed after the twenty-second interview; however, three additional interviews were conducted to confirm thematic stability.

At the beginning of each session, participants were invited—upon informed consent—to share basic demographic and biographical information. The interview protocol was structured around open-ended guiding questions designed to encourage depth and reflection. Core questions included:

- How do you perceive the current situation of women in Saudi Arabia?
- What is your view regarding women's contributions to social, economic, and environmental change?
- What types of activities do you most frequently engage in within your family and community?
- Do you perceive additional opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia? If so, how and why?

Follow-up prompts were used to clarify meanings, explore examples, and deepen interpretation where necessary. In line with Carpenter and Suto [82], particular care was taken to establish a respectful and non-judgmental interview environment to facilitate open dialogue and minimize response inhibition. All interviews were conducted in Arabic to preserve linguistic nuance and cultural expression. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Arabic before being translated into English for analysis. To ensure translation accuracy, transcripts were reviewed for conceptual equivalence rather than literal correspondence, preserving participants' intended meanings while maintaining analytical clarity.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim in Arabic prior to translation and analysis. Data were managed and organized using Atlas.ti 8 software to facilitate systematic coding and traceability of meaning units. The analysis followed the descriptive phenomenological procedure outlined by Giorgi [80], which involves four structured phases. First, transcripts were read

repeatedly to achieve holistic immersion in the data and to bracket preconceived assumptions. This bracketing process aimed to suspend prior theoretical judgments in order to remain grounded in participants' lived descriptions. Second, transcripts were segmented into meaning units by identifying shifts in experiential emphasis within participants' narratives. These units were not predefined but emerged inductively from the text. Third, the identified meaning units were transformed into psychologically and socially relevant expressions while maintaining fidelity to the original accounts. This transformation process allowed raw descriptions to be articulated in analytically coherent terms without detaching them from participants' lived contexts. Finally, meaning units were synthesized into higher-order thematic structures representing shared experiential patterns across cases. Through iterative comparison and refinement, these themes were integrated into a coherent interpretive framework capturing the essence of Saudi women's perceived roles in advancing cultural sustainability and multidimensional sustainable development. The analytical process was iterative rather than linear; coding decisions were continuously revisited to ensure consistency and conceptual alignment. Atlas.ti facilitated transparency by allowing systematic tracking of coded segments and thematic development. This structured approach enhanced analytical rigor while preserving the phenomenological commitment to experiential authenticity.

## **4. Results**

This study employed a qualitative design based on in-depth interviews to explore Saudi women's perceptions of their contribution to cultural sustainability and broader social, economic, and environmental transformation. Data were analyzed using the phenomenological procedure proposed by Giorgi [80], which involves four stages: (1) immersion in the transcripts through repeated reading, (2) identification of meaning units, (3) clustering of meaning units into thematic structures, and (4) synthesis into an integrated description of the phenomenon. The analysis revealed four overarching thematic domains: (1) perceived transformation of women's status, (2) responsibility and independence as core identity constructs, (3) cultural change through awareness and lifestyle evolution, and (4) environmental consciousness as intergenerational responsibility. Across these domains, participants' narratives revealed not only experiences of opportunity and expansion, but also moments of tension, negotiation, and adjustment as women balanced emerging possibilities with enduring social expectations.

### **4.1. Perceived Transformation of Women's Status**

Participants consistently described the present moment as a period of visible and tangible transition. The transformation of women's status was experienced not merely as a policy shift, but as a lived reconfiguration of everyday mobility, opportunity, and recognition. A recurrent narrative contrasted "before" and "now," with women emphasizing the expansion of choice and access. The ability to drive was frequently cited as a symbol of autonomy embedded in daily life. One participant stated:

"Driving changed everything for me. It is not only about movement; it is about feeling capable and trusted."

For many, mobility translated directly into professional continuity and improved family management. Participants described increased ease in balancing work responsibilities and domestic obligations, reinforcing the perception that reform affected both public and private spheres simultaneously. At the same time, some participants noted that these new opportunities sometimes generated additional expectations and pressures, particularly in relation to maintaining traditional family roles while pursuing expanded professional engagement.

Beyond mobility, women articulated a growing sense of visibility in professional and social arenas. Several participants expressed pride in contributing to national development initiatives, describing themselves as “partners in change” rather than passive beneficiaries. As one participant explained:

“We are no longer watching transformation from outside; we are part of it.”

Importantly, the perceived transformation extended beyond formal rights. Participants described a psychological shift characterized by recognition, validation, and confidence. One interviewee noted:

“The biggest change is not the laws. It is how society sees us—and how we see ourselves.”

This internal redefinition of identity suggests that status transformation is experienced both externally (through institutional reform) and internally (through self-perception). However, while optimism was prevalent, some participants acknowledged that transformation remains uneven, with acceptance varying across social contexts. Participants occasionally described navigating mixed reactions within communities, where support for women’s expanded roles coexisted with lingering hesitation or skepticism. Thus, the experience of status change was characterized by expansion, negotiation, and ongoing adjustment rather than complete resolution.

#### **4.2. Responsibility and Independence**

A central theme emerging from the interviews was the reframing of empowerment as responsibility rather than unrestricted autonomy. Participants did not equate independence with detachment from cultural expectations; instead, autonomy was consistently described as embedded within moral and social accountability.

One participant articulated this position succinctly:

“Independence obliges responsibility within limits.”

This phrase captures a recurring experiential pattern. Women described empowerment as the capacity to make decisions while remaining attentive to family cohesion, social harmony, and religious values. Rather than perceiving cultural expectations as purely restrictive, many participants framed them as guiding structures within which agency operates. Nevertheless, participants also described moments in which balancing personal aspirations with family and societal expectations required careful negotiation and, at times, emotional compromise.

Generational differences emerged as a subtheme. Younger participants reported navigating tensions between expanded aspirations and inherited norms. One interviewee reflected:

“We have more opportunities, but we still negotiate how far we can go without creating conflict.”

This negotiation was not portrayed as paralysis, but as a dynamic balancing process. Women often described empowerment as involving continuous adjustment between emerging autonomy and existing cultural responsibilities. Empowerment, in this sense, was lived as adaptive calibration rather than confrontation.

Motherhood further shaped interpretations of independence. Several participants described financial autonomy as enabling them to influence their children’s education, lifestyle, and future opportunities. As one woman explained:

“When I am financially independent, I can decide what kind of education my children receive.”

Independence thus extended beyond individual advancement, becoming a mechanism for intergenerational influence. The lived experience of empowerment was therefore relational, embedded in family structures and long-term responsibility rather than individualistic self-realization.

### **4.3. Cultural Change: Awareness, Lifestyle, and Quality of Life**

Cultural transformation was experienced as a gradual redefinition of identity rather than a rupture with tradition. Participants described an expansion of life possibilities, where domestic roles remained valued but were no longer perceived as exclusive.

A recurring experiential motif concerned heightened awareness. Increased access to information—particularly through digital platforms—was described as transformative. One participant noted:

“Through social media, we see how other women live, work, and contribute. It changes how we think about ourselves.”

Awareness was closely linked to lifestyle evolution. Participants referred to new opportunities for sports participation, public engagement, and professional networking as markers of tangible change. These shifts were interpreted not as abandonment of cultural values, but as reinterpretation within contemporary contexts. At the same time, some participants indicated that adapting to these evolving expectations sometimes generated uncertainty regarding how to reconcile new opportunities with established cultural norms.

Quality of life emerged as a connecting thread. Women described improved mobility, expanded recreational spaces, and broader professional access as contributing to enhanced well-being. As one participant stated:

“Life feels more open now. We are not confined to one path.”

Importantly, cultural change was described as cumulative and layered. Participants emphasized that adaptation occurs gradually through education, dialogue, and everyday practice rather than through abrupt displacement of tradition. This gradual process was often experienced as a process of ongoing negotiation rather than a complete or frictionless transformation.

### **4.4. Environmental Consciousness**

Environmental awareness emerged as a morally framed dimension of transformation. Participants consistently articulated environmental responsibility in relation to future generations, particularly children.

One interviewee expressed:

“We must take care of nature because this is where our children will grow.”

Environmental stewardship was described not only as civic obligation but also as spiritual and ethical duty. Participants linked ecological protection to health, well-being, and moral accountability.

At the household level, women described influencing family behaviors related to waste reduction, resource conservation, and sustainable practices. As one participant explained:

“If I teach my children to respect the environment, they will carry that habit forward.”

Environmental agency was thus experienced as embedded in daily routines rather than institutional activism. While participants acknowledged limited institutional support, they perceived themselves as capable of shaping micro-level behavioral change within families and communities. However, several participants also noted that translating environmental awareness into broader institutional participation remains challenging due to limited formal channels for engagement.

This intergenerational framing aligns with broader themes of responsibility and continuity, reinforcing the interconnected nature of cultural, social, and environmental sustainability in participants’ lived experiences.

Table (1) below summarizes the main themes and sub-themes identified from the interviews, linking them to cultural, social, economic, and environmental sustainability. The purpose is to provide a clear overview of how women perceive their roles in each domain of sustainable development, supporting qualitative findings with direct quotes.

**Table 1.** Thematic Analysis of Women’s Contribution to Sustainable Development.

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Quote	Sustainability Dimension
Transformation of Women’s Status	Mobility, social visibility, recognition	“Driving changed everything for me. It is not only about movement; it is about feeling capable and trusted.”	Social
Responsibility and Independence	Decision-making, family responsibility, intergenerational influence	“Independence obliges responsibility within limits.”	Social / Cultural
Economic Empowerment	Employment participation, financial autonomy, career continuity	“When I am financially independent, I can decide what kind of education my children receive.”	Economic
Cultural Awareness and Lifestyle	Digital awareness, lifestyle change, quality of life	“Life feels more open now. We are not confined to one path.”	Cultural
Environmental Consciousness	Household environmental practices, intergenerational responsibility	“We must take care of nature because this is where our children will grow.”	Environmental

In addition, Table (2) summarizes internal and external factors influencing women’s agency in the context of Saudi Arabia. The table highlights the dynamic interplay between opportunities and challenges, offering readers actionable insight for policy and practical interventions.

**Table 2.** Factors Facilitating and Limiting Women’s Contributions to Sustainable Development.

Factor Type	Facilitating Factors	Limiting Factors	Illustrative Quote
Social	Family support, generational dialogue, community acceptance	Social expectations, pressure to maintain traditional roles	“We have more opportunities, but we still negotiate how far we can go without creating conflict.”
Economic	Employment opportunities, financial independence, professional development	Work–family balance pressures, career interruptions	“Continuing my career while managing family responsibilities can be challenging.”
Cultural	Education, digital awareness, exposure to global perspectives	Gradual societal acceptance of evolving roles	“Acceptance is growing, but it still takes time for attitudes to change.”
Environmental	Household awareness, moral responsibility toward future generations	Limited institutional channels for environmental participation	“If I teach my children to respect the environment, they will carry that habit forward.”

## 5. Discussion

The present findings extend existing scholarship by positioning Saudi women not merely as beneficiaries of reform but as culturally embedded agents of sustainable transformation. Rather than conceptualizing empowerment solely through expanded access to education and employment, the study reveals a more nuanced experiential pattern: empowerment is internalized as responsibility. This dual construction—*independence intertwined with accountability*—suggests that agency in the Saudi context

operates within negotiated cultural boundaries rather than through oppositional individualism. Importantly, participants' narratives indicate that this negotiation is not always seamless; women often described balancing expanding opportunities with enduring cultural expectations, a process that occasionally generates tension and requires careful social navigation.

While participants' optimism aligns with prior research highlighting the importance of educational expansion and policy reform [22,24,25], the persistence of structural and normative tensions confirms earlier findings regarding workplace and social constraints [26,27]. However, the present study adds depth by illustrating how women actively interpret and mediate these constraints rather than passively experiencing them. Transformation thus appears neither linear nor purely structural; it unfolds through ongoing negotiation between institutional reform and cultural continuity. Participants' accounts therefore reflect a process of adaptive adjustment in which empowerment is pursued while simultaneously managing social expectations and practical responsibilities.

The integration of independence and responsibility resonates with theoretical perspectives linking empowerment to equity and social sustainability [35,46]. Yet, the findings suggest that equity in this context is not experienced primarily as confrontation with tradition, but as adaptive recalibration within it. Echoing Giele's [66] distinction between internal and external transformation, women's narratives demonstrate how shifts in self-perception precede and reinforce structural participation. Intergenerational influence further reinforces this dynamic, aligning with Soini and Birkeland's [83] and Chiu's [84] emphasis on the transmission and reinterpretation of cultural capital. At the same time, this intergenerational responsibility occasionally intensifies the pressure placed on women to simultaneously fulfill evolving professional roles and longstanding familial obligations.

Importantly, cultural change emerged as evolutionary rather than disruptive. Participants' emphasis on awareness, lifestyle diversification, and quality of life reflects Laine's [32] multi-level conceptualization of cultural sustainability and Kosanovic et al.'s [33] model of resilience combined with openness to progress. The prominence of digital connectivity introduces a contemporary dimension, suggesting that technological mediation accelerates identity negotiation and value diffusion across micro and macro levels. However, this expansion of awareness also exposes women to diverse global expectations, sometimes complicating the process of aligning new aspirations with established cultural norms. Nevertheless, the notion of cultural sustainability requires careful consideration of which cultural elements are sustained and how they evolve over time [7]. Cultural traditions are not inherently neutral; some practices may historically reflect hierarchical gender roles or unequal power relations [85,86]. The findings of this study suggest that participants do not perceive cultural sustainability as passive preservation, but rather as an ongoing process of reinterpretation and negotiation. Women's narratives indicate that certain cultural values—such as family cohesion, responsibility, and intergenerational care—are maintained, while other expectations are gradually re-evaluated and adapted in light of expanding educational, professional, and social opportunities [28]. This interpretation reflects the conceptualization introduced earlier in this study, where cultural sustainability involves the continuity, adaptation, and intergenerational transmission of cultural values through ongoing negotiation between tradition and innovation. In this sense, cultural sustainability emerges not as the reproduction of inequality, but as a dynamic process through which cultural meanings are selectively reinterpreted and aligned with evolving social realities [7].

From an economic perspective, the findings support the reciprocal relationship between women's empowerment and sustainable growth described by Bhoganadam [53] and de Haan [55]. However, tensions surrounding caregiving responsibilities and career continuity echo demographic analyses by Kleven and

Landais <sup>[56]</sup>, indicating that structural support systems remain critical for sustaining long-term participation. Empowerment, therefore, must be understood not only as access to labor markets but as the durability of economic engagement across life stages. Participants' experiences suggest that sustaining professional trajectories frequently requires ongoing negotiation between career aspirations and family-centered expectations.

Environmental consciousness, framed as intergenerational moral duty, aligns with ecofeminist and adaptive governance perspectives <sup>[71,72,73,76,78,79]</sup>. Yet the findings highlight a distinction between household-level environmental agency and institutional integration. While women perceive themselves as influential actors within families and communities, their role within formal environmental governance structures remains limited. This gap illustrates a broader tension between growing environmental awareness at the societal level and the still-developing institutional channels through which such engagement can be formally expressed. This discrepancy suggests an opportunity for policy alignment between grassroots environmental awareness and institutional participation mechanisms.

The empirical findings also clarify how women's agency operates across multiple dimensions of sustainable development. Cultural awareness shapes values and norms that influence social relations within families and communities. These social dynamics, in turn, support women's participation in education and employment, strengthening economic sustainability. Economic independence further enhances women's capacity to influence intergenerational practices and household decision-making, including environmental awareness and responsible resource use. Through this interconnected process, women's everyday practices function as a linking mechanism that connects cultural values, social interaction, economic participation, and environmental responsibility. Women's empowerment therefore operates not within a single dimension, but as a cross-dimensional catalyst that reinforces the interaction between cultural, social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

Taken together, the study underscores the interdependence of cultural, social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Rather than operating independently, these domains intersect through women's lived experiences of responsibility, negotiation, and adaptive continuity. Cultural awareness emerges as the underlying integrative force that shapes perception, informs action, and sustains long-term transformation. Sustainable development in the Saudi context, therefore, appears contingent not solely on legislative reform, but on the consolidation of women's culturally grounded agency as a stabilizing and generative force within national transformation processes. In this vein, the findings indicate that this transformation remains a negotiated and evolving process, shaped by the ongoing interaction between expanding opportunities and persistent social structures.

## **6. Theoretical Implications**

This study advances theoretical debates on women's empowerment and sustainability by reframing empowerment as a culturally embedded process rather than a purely structural outcome. While dominant empowerment models often rely on measurable indicators such as labor force participation or legal rights, the present findings foreground empowerment as a lived, relational experience shaped by autonomy intertwined with moral responsibility. This conceptual shift suggests that sustainability-oriented empowerment frameworks must integrate psychological, ethical, and cultural dimensions alongside institutional metrics. Empowerment, in this context, is not simply access—it is negotiated agency situated within normative systems.

The findings also contribute to cultural sustainability theory by challenging rupture-based models of social change. Rather than depicting modernization and tradition as competing forces, the study demonstrates that transformation can occur through adaptive continuity. Cultural identity emerges as dynamically reinterpreted while remaining anchored in core values. This perspective refines multi-level models of cultural sustainability (micro, meso, macro) by illustrating how identity negotiation, family-level transmission, and national reform processes interact simultaneously within lived experience.

Furthermore, the study advances integrative sustainability theory by empirically demonstrating the cross-domain diffusion of agency. Women's economic independence was not experienced as an isolated achievement but as a catalyst for broader social and environmental influence, particularly through intergenerational transmission. This ripple-effect mechanism suggests that sustainability dimensions are not parallel pillars but interdependent processes mediated by culturally situated actors. More specifically, the findings indicate that cultural awareness shapes social practices within families and communities, these social dynamics support women's participation in economic activities, and economic independence strengthens women's capacity to influence environmental responsibility and intergenerational sustainability practices. In doing so, the findings support and extend intersectional approaches to sustainability by showing how gendered experience actively shapes systemic development pathways.

Finally, the identification of digital awareness as a mediating structure introduces a contemporary theoretical layer to empowerment and cultural sustainability discourse. Digital environments appear to function as accelerators of cognitive and normative transformation, bridging policy reform and everyday practice. This insight calls for sustainability models that explicitly incorporate technological mediation as a factor in identity formation, value diffusion, and social adaptation.

Collectively, these theoretical contributions reposition Saudi women not merely within existing sustainability frameworks, but as central agents through whom cultural continuity, adaptive reform, and multi-domain sustainability intersect.

## **7. Practical Implications**

The findings generate several policy-relevant implications for stakeholders engaged in Saudi Arabia's national transformation agenda. First, empowerment initiatives should evolve from symbolic inclusion toward sustainability-oriented institutional design. Participants' narratives reveal that long-term participation depends not merely on access to employment, but on the durability of engagement across life stages. Expanding childcare infrastructure, institutionalizing flexible work frameworks, and normalizing family-responsive labor policies would directly address the identified tension between professional continuity and caregiving responsibilities. Such measures would enhance not only gender equity but also economic sustainability by reducing career interruption cycles.

Second, leadership development programs targeting women should integrate civic and environmental components rather than focusing exclusively on professional advancement. Since empowerment was consistently framed as responsibility embedded within cultural norms, training initiatives could incorporate modules on community leadership, sustainability literacy, and intergenerational value transmission. Embedding environmental stewardship within women's professional and civic platforms may facilitate alignment between household-level awareness and formal governance structures.

Third, the identified generational negotiation suggests the need for structured intergenerational dialogue mechanisms. Educational institutions and community organizations could establish moderated forums that enable constructive exchange between traditional and emerging perspectives. By framing transformation as

adaptive continuity rather than cultural displacement, such initiatives may reduce normative resistance and strengthen social cohesion during reform processes.

Fourth, the prominence of digital awareness underscores the strategic importance of digital literacy policy. Strengthening women's critical engagement with digital platforms—including media literacy, online entrepreneurship, and professional networking—could amplify their influence across economic and cultural domains. Digital ecosystems may function as accelerators of sustainable transformation when supported by responsible governance and access equity.

Finally, policymakers should recognize the interdependence among cultural, social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Rather than treating gender inclusion as a discrete policy objective, it should be integrated across development strategies. Coordinated alignment among legal reform, institutional infrastructure, educational programming, and environmental initiatives would reinforce women's agency as a stabilizing force within long-term national development.

## **8. Limitations and Future Research**

While the study offers in-depth insight into Saudi women's lived experiences of cultural sustainability, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research is context-specific, focusing on a purposive sample within the Al Qassim region. Although phenomenological inquiry prioritizes depth over statistical generalizability, experiences may vary across other regions, socio-economic contexts, and generational cohorts. Expanding geographical and demographic diversity in future studies would enrich comparative understanding of how cultural negotiation unfolds across differing local environments. In addition, the sample primarily consists of professionally active and relatively well-educated women with established career trajectories. While this group provides valuable insight into how women engaged in institutional and professional environments interpret ongoing reforms, the experiences of women outside these contexts—such as those with different educational backgrounds, employment statuses, or social positions—may differ and warrant further investigation.

Second, the study relies on self-reported narratives. While such accounts are central to phenomenological exploration, they may reflect socially desirable responses or optimism shaped by ongoing national reforms. Incorporating mixed-method approaches, observational data, or institutional performance indicators could strengthen triangulation and provide complementary perspectives on behavioral and structural change.

Third, the research centers on women's perceptions without systematically integrating the viewpoints of other social actors. Given that cultural sustainability is relational and system-based, future studies may benefit from multi-stakeholder designs that include men, policymakers, employers, and community leaders. Such comparative approaches could illuminate how cultural transformation is co-constructed across social positions.

Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a specific moment within a rapidly evolving reform context. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable in assessing whether perceived empowerment translates into sustained structural transformation over time. Tracking generational shifts in identity, agency, and cultural interpretation could provide deeper evidence regarding the durability of adaptive continuity.

Future research may also explore regional variation within Saudi Arabia, examining differences between urban and rural settings or across economic sectors. Comparative studies across Gulf and Middle Eastern contexts could further clarify how policy frameworks interact with cultural norms to shape gendered

sustainability pathways. Moreover, the role of digital environments in mediating cultural awareness warrants more systematic investigation, particularly regarding identity negotiation, online activism, and community mobilization.

Finally, while environmental consciousness emerged as a meaningful theme, empirical research is needed to assess women's formal participation in environmental governance, green entrepreneurship, and institutional sustainability initiatives. Examining structural enablers and constraints in these areas would deepen understanding of how cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability intersect in practice.

## 9. Conclusion

This study examined how Saudi women perceive and enact their role in advancing cultural sustainability within a rapidly evolving national context. The findings demonstrate that empowerment is experienced not merely as expanded access to rights and opportunities, but as a culturally embedded process integrating independence with moral responsibility. Women's agency emerges as relational, intergenerational, and negotiated within existing value systems rather than detached from them. Participants' narratives further suggest that this negotiation often involves balancing emerging opportunities with enduring social expectations, reflecting a process that is adaptive but not always free of tension. The results indicate that cultural transformation in the Saudi context unfolds through adaptive continuity rather than rupture. Increased awareness, lifestyle diversification, and enhanced participation in public life coexist with sustained commitment to core social values. Women's experiences indicate that navigating these parallel expectations frequently requires ongoing adjustment between expanding professional roles and established familial and cultural responsibilities. This pattern suggests that sustainable development is reinforced not by displacement of tradition, but by its reinterpretation. Moreover, the study highlights the interdependence of cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability. Women's material independence and professional engagement function as catalysts for broader social influence, particularly through intergenerational transmission and environmental stewardship. Empowerment, therefore, operates as a cross-domain mechanism generating ripple effects beyond individual advancement. More specifically, women's agency links the four dimensions of sustainable development: cultural values shape social practices within families and communities, these social dynamics facilitate women's participation in economic activities, and economic independence strengthens women's capacity to promote environmental responsibility and intergenerational sustainability practices. However, participants' accounts also indicate that sustaining these roles over time depends on the availability of supportive institutional and social structures capable of accommodating women's evolving responsibilities. At a structural level, national reforms have created enabling conditions for participation. However, the durability of transformation depends on the consolidation of culturally grounded agency through institutional support, intergenerational dialogue, and sustained social adaptation. The findings therefore suggest that national transformation is not a frictionless process, but one that unfolds through continuous negotiation between policy change, social expectations, and women's everyday practices. Ultimately, the study affirms that Saudi women are not peripheral beneficiaries of development but central actors in shaping a model of sustainability that is both contextually anchored and forward-looking. Their lived experiences illustrate how tradition and innovation can converge to produce resilient and culturally coherent pathways of national transformation. These pathways, however, remain dynamic and evolving, shaped by ongoing dialogue between continuity and change.

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