

Mentorship and Role Modeling, In and Out of the House: Evidence from High School Girls in Saudi Arabia

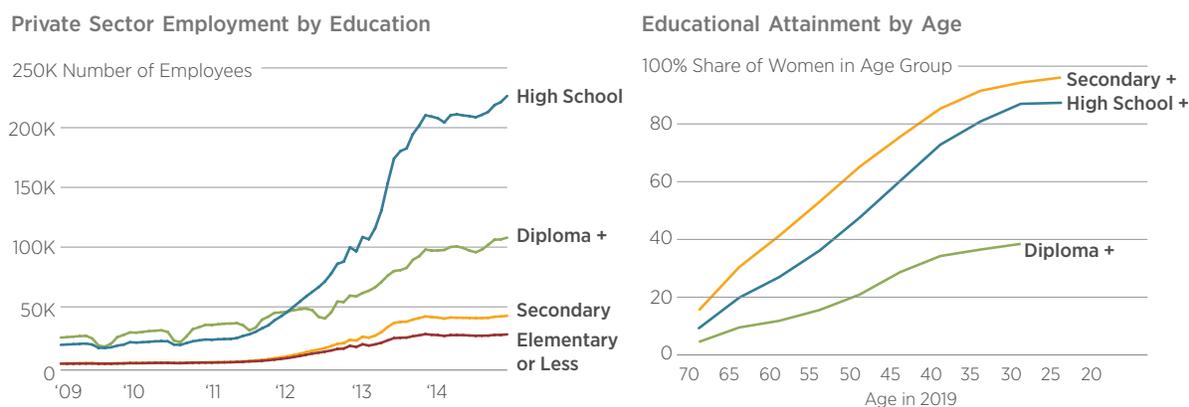
Based on BFI Working Paper 2022-48, *“Mentorship and Role Modeling, In and Out of the House: Evidence from High School Girls in Saudi Arabia,”* by Alessandra L. González, University of Chicago; Inmaculada Macias-Alonso, Harvard Kennedy School; and Jennifer Peck, Swarthmore College

Formal mentoring increases professional aspirations among female high school students; these effects are magnified when students have fathers and working mothers in the house during the lockdown.

Saudi female labor force participation increased from just 11 percent in 2000 to 26 percent by the end of 2019, marked by an unprecedented shift in both the number and types of jobs available for Saudi women, and driven in part by a slate of ambitious labor reforms that began in 2011. Those policy shifts have coincided with more progressive social norms toward women’s work outside the home in Saudi society, though households are likely slower to adapt than the rapid policy changes would suggest.

Much of this growth has been concentrated among young women with secondary-level degrees, and Saudi women with high school diplomas have seen the largest growth in private sector employment of any demographic group in Saudi Arabia since 2011. The accompanying Figure shows the increase in private sector employment by educational attainment for Saudi women from 2009 to 2015. This sudden shift in economic prospects highlights the importance of mentoring for young Saudi women, many of whom are likely the first in their

Figure 1 • Female Employment by Education and Educational Attainment by Age



Note: This Figure shows the increase in private sector employment by educational attainment for Saudi women from 2009 to 2015.

Source: General Organization for Social Insurance; GaStat: Education and Training Survey (2017).

families to complete secondary (or tertiary) schooling and enter the labor force. Mentoring may come from people outside the family, such as teachers and friends, or from role models within the family: mothers, fathers, siblings, and other extended family members.

While research has revealed the importance of mentorship in the development of women's careers, less is known about the impact of mentoring at a relatively early age. This research fills that gap by examining the impact of a formal mentoring program on female youth labor market aspirations, and how this intersects with existing familial influence in the study's Saudi setting, where female employment has been historically low. The authors explore these effects against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, in which lockdowns interrupted access to outside mentors and increased the importance of within-household relationships, to find the following:

- Short-term formal mentoring interventions that provide role models of working women outside the household can have a positive effect on the medium-run aspirations of high school students to work outside of the home
- In-household role models, including fathers and working mothers, can boost the effect of the external mentoring

Finally, while this work shows the importance of a short-term formal mentoring intervention for high school female students on their career aspirations, the authors stress the need for future study that investigates the household dynamics that boost or moderate the impact of formal mentoring programs.

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