

**Transforming Women's Roles in  
Saudia Arabia:  
Saudi Female Employee and Female  
Filipina Migrant Caregivers**

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## **Abstract**

The relationship between migration and development has become increasingly prominent in recent years, elevating international migration to a high priority on the global agenda. However, in Arab, the role of women is also changing from being housewives to working women, and the rate of Filipina employees also increases. However, there is a gap in exploring the relationship between Saudi working women and Filipina employees. An interview-based study was conducted in different places, such as medical facilities, schools, and communities, to fill this gap. This study sheds light on the complex economic and social relationships between Saudi female employees and Filipino migrant domestic workers. Also, it contributes attention to the economic, social, and emotional complexities of employee-employer relationship, and how does the adoption of Filipinas contribute to the evolution of the role of Saudi women. This study suggests that both Saudi working women and Filipina employees are navigating diverse and non-traditional approaches to embodying gender and family roles. Despite these variations, they actively establish or safeguard their respective ideals of family life.

## **Keywords**

Filipina Employees, Migration, Saudi Arabia, Women's Rule, Working Women

## **1. Introduction**

Despite ubiquitous in social life and impacting nearly every society, female domestic labour remains contentious at any given time and location. This is true regardless of whether the women engaged in domestic work are employed (Cotter et al., 2001) or working 'voluntarily' to support their families. Economically, it is not reasonable to try to eliminate paid domestic labour as long as there are employment opportunities offered by rich to poor people in need of money. Public buildings, government offices, hotels, hospitals, hospices, and other public facilities in any community must provide services. "Services are essential for both social and economic reasons, dictated by the conditions of social life and the economy. A service is a necessity for both social and economic aspects, shaped by social life and economic conditions."It is a well-established social phenomenon in Arab and Islamic societies. Islam neither rejects nor deems it a negative phenomenon but acknowledges it as a natural and inherent aspect of life (Maftuhah, 2022).

In the current era, the role of Arab women is changing from being only housewives to working outside the home and involvement in the community in educational (Arar & Oplatka, 2016); medical (Al Sabah et al., 2019; Alruwaili et al., 2024), and commercial areas. It has thus become a requirement of modern life to employ domestic workers, which has inflated the number of expatriates working in Saudi society. Due to women entering the labour market, Saudi daughters, wives, and mothers are increasingly employing migrant Filipinas (Parreñas, 2000) to fill the gaps in the family created by social and economic forces that encourage women to pursue education and work outside the home. Their employment enables Saudi women to pursue new roles while ensuring the fulfilment of their family obligations. However, this phenomenon has aroused

controversy: some critics argue that the presence of the nanny and maid adversely affects the Gulf society (Al-Asali, 2012; Azeez & Begum, 2009; Leonard, 2002; Roper & Barria, 2014)

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"Despite the existing research, significant gaps remain in the literature, particularly regarding the evolving roles of Saudi women and their perceptions of the migrant women they work alongside." So, several questions arise that need to be addressed, including the roles of the Filipina migrant workforce and Saudi women employers, the impact of Filipina migrant domestic workers on the economy of Saudi Arabia, as well as the attitude of Saudi employers towards their Filipina domestic workers. The current study sheds light on the economic and social complexities of the relationship between Saudi female employees and Filipina migrant domestic workers. The significance of the recent research is that it contributes to the understanding of the phenomenon of migrant labour, which is scarce in Saudi society at present. This article draws attention to the economic, social, and emotional complexities of the relationship between employee and employer and how the recruitment of Filipinas contributes to the evolution of the role of Saudi women, helping them to satisfy their ambitions through negotiating new ways of performing gender and family.

## **2. Background / Literature Survey**

### **2.1 Saudi Arabia: Persistence and Transformation**

According to Al-Mutlag, Saudi Arabia is changing due to urbanization, which has affected technology, expatriate skills, and internal migration (Al-Mutlag, 2003). However, this kind of change is sluggish and uneven, and it usually shows up as a "culture lag" (Ogburn, 1922). This is when social life evolves slowly while infrastructure and technology adapt more quickly. Thus, old and new forces can coexist. As mentioned by Parsons (Parsons, 1951):

*"... even in a relatively stabilized society, processes of structural change are continually going on in many subsystems of the society, a complex social system is not either stabilized or changing as a whole, but in different parts and different respects, always both".*

"Thus, the social heritage and value system have not fully adapted to the changes in material culture, resulting in new material conditions coexisting with 'traditional' cultural values. Due to economic and demographic transformations, Saudi Arabia finds itself between the competing forces of moderation and tradition. This has led to the erosion of old certainties about the meaning of family and marriage, as a contradiction emerges between the demands of the labor market and the demands of relationships (Elyas, 2011). The distinction between traditional gender roles is increasingly becoming blurred, affecting how families function (Altorki, 1986). This is evidenced by the contrasting findings of two studies by Abdobaker (Doumato, 2000). In a survey conducted in 1980, 70% of male university graduates stated they would not want to marry a college graduate, nor did they want their wives to contribute to the household budget, as they perceived this as a threat to their authority. In contrast, a later study found that many men considered an

educated wife a vital asset in a potential marriage, as she could contribute to the family's income (Al-Khateeb, 1998)."

Since the 1960s, several targeted government initiatives for women have helped alter their positions. Most significantly, these initiatives have promoted female education. Women outnumbered men in higher education when female Saudi university students doubled between 1983 and 1993 and again in 2000 (Doumato, 2000). Due to these educational policies, more Saudi women are participating in extramarital affairs and are being drawn away from their homes. Many now leave their homes every day to go to work or study (El-Sanabary, 1994). Women now occupy sections of public space formerly accessible by men due to modernization, urbanization, and education (U.S. Library of Congress, 2007).

"Economic changes resulting in a higher cost of living have prompted Saudi women to join the workforce to support their family income. The absence of women from the home, coupled with the persistent view of domestic work as women's responsibility, has led to an increased need for assistance with these tasks (Silvey, 2004, 2007). A common solution has been the employment of domestic labor, often migrant workers."

However, Saudi writers identify several reasons for the growing employment trend of migrant domestic workers. Predominant among them, they note women's increased involvement in education and work outside the home (Al-Sighaier, 2002; Kisnawi, 1988; Salem, 1992) and the difficulty for women in reconciling work and responsibilities in the home (Khudhairi, 2003; Omari, 2003) draws attention to the scale of modern houses, which require more upkeep, while other sources point to ostentation and desire to keep up appearances (Salem, 1992). Longside

these factors is the easy availability of migrant workers at a modest cost (Al- Sighaier, 2002), which has brought the employment of domestic workers within the reach of Saudis in various occupations and echelons of society.

"Globalization has led to increased labor mobility and international migration, driven by 'push' factors (Parkins, 2010). Nearly half of these migrants are women, who are increasingly traveling alone as primary earners for their families (Conference, 2004). This migration has an ethnic dimension, with Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Indonesia being major sources of female domestic labor, particularly to the Middle East. The Philippine government actively promotes migration to alleviate local unemployment and attract foreign exchange (Kurian, 2004). Saudi Arabia's wealth makes it a popular destination for migrants from these countries. Additionally, Elyas (2014) notes a religious aspect to Saudi Arabia's Muslim culture, presenting it as a haven for Muslim Filipinas facing discrimination and disadvantage in their home country, where Muslims are a minority (Elyas & Johnson, 2014)."

## **2.2 Saudi Arabia's Migrant Domestic Workers**

According to estimates, there are around 2 million migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. A survey of 1000 households revealed that over 74% of respondents in urban areas employed migrant domestic workers, with nearly 60% considering these workers "indispensable". Furthermore, three-quarters of employing households had more than one domestic worker. Most of the migrants were employed as cleaners, with over 80% of surveyed heads of household employing cleaners and 40% employing nannies (Khudhairi, 2003).

As noted previously, this trend is politically and socially controversial. Moreover, very few Saudi scholars have

mentioned the positive impacts of employing migrant workers and those that did so only briefly referenced such effects (Kisnawi, 1988) and noted the benefits of a clean house and employers having more time to devote to business. Al-Ansari (1990) acknowledged that the employment of domestic workers allowed more opportunities for Saudi women to work for good wages and enhanced the family income (Al-Ansari, 1990).

The picture of the role of migrant domestic workers in the family and society as portrayed by Saudi academics and the media is, however, overwhelmingly negative. They are described as a "necessary evil" (Omari, 2003) and a "social problem" (Khudhairi, 2003) and held to blame for a variety of family problems and social ills. Particular concerns about adverse impacts on children from the employment of foreign nannies and other domestic workers are expressed. It is said that the poor communicative competence of such workers is detrimental to children's development of proficiency in Arabic (Shahrani, 1997), that children acquire bad habits from them (Al-Edaan, N. E., 1985), that they are negligent of children's safety (Shahrani, 1997) or even abusive (Al-Ansari, 1990) and that time spent with foreign worker weakens children's relationship with their mother (Kisnawi, 1988).

Harmful impacts on the family as a whole are said to include domestic employees' disclosure of private family matters (Al-Edaan, N. E., 1985), the financial burden on the head of the household (Al-Sighaier, 2002; Salem, 1992), and the tendency to encourage the employing family's laziness and dependence (Al-Sighaier, 2002). At the more comprehensive societal level, foreign employees, particularly non-Muslims, but even Muslims who are considered unorthodox in their beliefs and practices, have been described as a "threat to religion" (Omari, 2003).



Foreign workers are held responsible for an increase in crimes such as burglary and theft (Al-Asiri, 1982), accused of sexual immorality within or outside the employing household (Al-Sighaier, 2002; Al-Ansari, 1990; Khudhairi, 2003), and have even been the subject of allegations of involvement in magic and sorcery (Al-Khamees, 2009).

An exciting feature of this moral panic is a focus on the connection between the employment of domestic workers and the changing social roles of women. Concerns have been expressed that reliance on domestic workers' help leads to women's "denial of their early training on household chores" (Kisnawi, 1988) and "eliminates the traditional role of women" (Omari, 2003). Indeed, the latter article called for a concerted campaign to "raise awareness" and provide "stronger directions" on women's "actual traditional role and functions". The same source also called for other solutions to the needs of working women, including a system of women's work that they can do at home and extended maternity leave.

This overview of the literature related to migrant domestic workers reveals the existence of several gaps and weaknesses. The migrant herself is confined mainly to one of two roles: the victim of economic hardship and social inequity or (in the Saudi literature) the dangerous alien disrupting families and society. The Arab literature, in particular, is predominantly written by male writers. Saudi social norms on the interaction between the sexes and a tendency to survey 'heads of households' means that most survey participants were probably male. The voice of female employers is missing. The normative, censorious stance adopted, especially towards women's supposed abandonment of their traditional role, fails to capture the complexities of the relationships between female employers and their migrant domestic labour. The current paper fills these gaps by providing insights from a small sample of employers in Madinah and their Filipina domestic workers.

### **3. Method**

"Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with Saudi working women and full-time students who managed households and employed housemaids. These interviews were complemented by discussions with the housemaids from the same families". The sensitivity of the research subject and Saudi norms related to family privacy posed difficulties in access. Therefore, the social network was drawn in Madinah to gain access to a convenience sample of 10 working women and 14 Filipina domestic workers. Interviews, which were recorded with participants' permission, elicited demographic information, details of salary payment and sponsorship arrangements, and information about housemaids' duties and working conditions, Including breaks and healthcare. Migrant workers were asked, in addition, about their reasons for working in Saudi Arabia. In contrast, working women were asked about their feelings towards the woman they employed and their attitudes towards their job responsibilities.

#### **3.1 Sample Profile**

Employers ranged in age from 24 to 60 years. They were engaged in various occupations, including university students, teachers, managers of the women's section of a bank, owner-manager of a beauty salon, journalists, and artists. Most were married; the youngest woman was single, and the oldest was a widow. All but the youngest were parents, and the older women also had grandchildren.

The domestic workers interviewed ranged in age from 24 to 55 but were concentrated predominantly in the mid to late 20s. Two were Christian, the remainder Muslim, although five were recent converts. All but three were high school graduates; one had a college diploma, and two had only

elementary education. Four were recent incomers, having worked in Saudi Arabia for less than a year. The majority, however, had worked in Saudi Arabia for 1-5 years and one for over 20 years. The majority spoke Arabic and English, although one reported speaking Arabic only with her employers, while three used English only.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1 The Economic Relationship**

Consistent with the reports of, for example, Elyas(Elyas, 2011), the women expressed predominantly economic motives for working in Saudi Arabia, mainly to help their families financially. One woman, for example, was supporting her unemployed husband and their five children, as well as sending money to her mother and disabled sister. Legally, under the state sponsorship system, their status was that of a dependent member of the employer's household. This system illuminates not only the legal and economic differences between the citizen employer and migrant employee but also gender roles in the management of Saudi households. Domestic workers were employed by or for the woman of the house to support her in domestic and child care roles that are seen as women's responsibility, even if they work outside the home. Generally, women "managed" these workers, including giving them their salary.

Nevertheless, it was usually the male head of the household who was formally named as the housemaid's sponsor and guardian, and he paid the expenses related to visa, passport, and others - and often the salary as well. Three of the women's employers said they spent the housemaid's salary, although one clarified that her husband provided the money for her to do so. Another explained that her husband was officially named the housemaid's employer and sponsor. In the case of a young unmarried university student, her parents paid and acted as sponsors. In all other cases,

however, the male head of the household undertook this responsibility. The employees could not always identify who paid their salary besides "my employer." Four indicated that they received their salary from "madam," but three distinguished between the source of money and the person who distributed it. However, the transfer was made by the woman of the house; the housemaids were clear, and the money was given to the wife by her husband for this purpose. Regarding passport and visa costs, one housemaid reportedly met these herself; the remainder indicated that their employer did so, two specifically naming 'madam'.

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"As these arrangements illustrate, the increased inclusion of Saudi women in higher education and their government-sanctioned 'differential participation' in the workforce..." (Silvey, 2004) have not superseded 'gender- normative ideologies and traditions' (Elyas & Johnson, 2014) that construe household management and caregiving as women's role, while men have financial responsibility and legal authority. One of the female employers interviewed depicted a departure from the traditional pattern when she explained the division of financial responsibilities between herself and her husband- he paid for the house, and she paid for the housemaid- reflecting the increased power and status outside work may give women as partners rather than subordinates to their husbands. Nevertheless, in most cases discussed here, traditional expectations were observed, and the housemaid was a household expense borne by the husband and a legal dependent under his ultimate control and authority – even if his wife usually exercised this.

Despite the migrant workers' dependent status in the employing households and the economic imperatives that had brought them to Saudi Arabia, their stories challenge the discourse of victimhood encouraged by the focus on

financial hardship (Misra et al., 2006). These women were proactive and ambitious, their migration an exercise of agency through which they sought, in their temporary home, to lay the foundations for a desired future in the Philippines; three had bought or were buying houses, two were saving to set up businesses, and one, having already purchased a home and car, had started to invest in jewelry. Moreover, those with children in school or college invested in their children's education, hoping to secure the next generation's prosperity. Clearly, and as they acknowledged, these women were fortunate to have found employers who paid a good salary regularly and on time and offered other gratuities such as food and personal necessities, which enabled their employees to save or repatriate a significant proportion of their pay. Not all are so fortunate. Indeed, one of those interviewed recalled an unhappy previous position in another city with an elderly employer who had denied her rights, even depriving her of food. Nevertheless, these examples show how, in some cases at least, Filipina migrants have been able to seize the opportunities offered by social change in Saudi Arabia to find new ways of fulfilling their family roles and building new, empowered identities for themselves and their children (Johnson & Wilcke, 2015).

## **4.2 Sharing the household**

In most cases, 'housemaids,' as they are commonly designated in Saudi Arabia, were employed to help with cleaning and, in four cases, to help with childcare. They might also do laundry and help with food preparation, in the latter case generally working alongside the mistress of the house (Vlieger, 2014). One employer pointed out that employing a housemaid to perform such duties was compensation for losing the help traditionally provided by extended family members. In the case of one older woman,

a widow, her housemaid played a more intimate role as companion, accompanying her employer on hospital visits and thereby, in the absence of a conveniently placed family member, providing a solution to the dilemma facing Saudi women who are constrained by cultural norms from consulting a male doctor unless escorted by a guardian or chaperone.

Such intimate sharing of lives and personal and social spaces created complex dynamics between employer and employee. Employers acknowledged some disadvantages to employing domestic help, the most frequently mentioned being a loss of privacy, as the housemaid had access to all the rooms in the house and knew all the family's business. However, one expressed the view that Filipina housemaids are more discreet than those of some other nationalities and better respect personal boundaries. Other disadvantages mentioned included a loss of control and a tendency for women to become 'lazy' and 'dependent'. One employer mentioned the tension in the household that could be created by jealousy between co-workers, another perceived a need to be extra vigilant in keeping track of personal possessions and "closing doors", and one woman raised the specter of the (unspecified) troubles that might ensue if the housemaid was given too much freedom.

Such disadvantages were, however, thought to be far outweighed by the advantages of employing domestic help. The labour provided by the housemaid allowed her employer to devote more time to work or study, to play with her children and supervise their studies, and even to spend time on herself- on personal care, exercise, and hobbies such as reading or sewing. It facilitated their social life; a frequent comment was that the women could entertain guests, even at short notice, confident that the house was always clean and tidy, while a young mother appreciated the

housemaid's care of her daughter, leaving her free to attend to her visitors. The presence of the housemaid was even said to support women's pursuit of spiritual interests- reading the Quran, performing additional voluntary prayers, and engaging in various unique activities for Ramadan. Moreover, the practical assistance of the housemaid had a psychological impact, relieving women of the stress and burden of dual roles as housewives and wage-earners.

### **4.3 An 'alien' in the family?**

Mothers, however, expressed ambivalence about housemaids' involvement in caring for their children. An appreciated impact was the opportunity for their children to learn and practice English, spoken by all but one of the housemaids interviewed. However, some concerns were expressed that prolonged interaction with housemaids might harm children's Arabic language development and expose them to undesirable customs and religious ideas. Two employers asserted that the parents' responsibility was to prevent such influence. Indeed, while most employers acknowledged that their housemaids were involved in childcare, they insisted that this took place under their supervision and often in their presence or that of the children's father or grandmother. Such attitudes reflected a complex mixture of feelings and motivations: fears aroused by media reports of abuse committed by domestic workers; a sense that even the most trusted housemaid was, nevertheless, a member of an 'alien' culture and so a potential threat to Saudi customs and values; and a maternal preference to "do all that myself", maintaining her central position in her children's life.

Despite this ambivalence, however, it was evident that these employers needed and valued the assistance and support provided by their domestic workers, which significantly impacted their lives, practically and psychologically. They

were keen to retain them by attending to their welfare. This meant structuring breaks into the working day, giving days off, and including them in family excursions.

The housemaids' accounts of their working day suggested their work typically began shortly after rising at 9 am and ended at around 11 pm or midnight when the employer's day ended. However, they were not "on duty" the whole time. The morning was generally spent in housework, but it was expected to have time off after lunch, and in the evenings, too, the women were often free to relax in their rooms when the family did not need them. In some households, the housewife gave general instructions on the tasks to be performed the whole day but left the housemaid freedom to decide when to do them. Housemaids had bed-sitting rooms where they could relax during breaks, watch TV, and perhaps call their families. All the employees affirmed that they could take time off when unwell, and some additionally mentioned that their employer would bring them food and medicine at such times. Only two reported buying their own medicine, one clarifying that this happened if she visited a pharmacy on her day off; otherwise, her employer paid all her medical expenses.

Both employers and employees mentioned a variety of perquisites and gifts given to the housemaids. All the employers, for example, provided at least some of the employees' requisites, such as toiletries, although the exact arrangements differed from case to case. In one case, an employee elaborated that 'madam' provided basics such as soap, shampoo, and toothpaste, and she bought other items herself. Others said they might purchase toiletries if they shop on their days off. Only three indicated that they regularly bought such items for themselves. Employees also reported receiving generous gifts from their employer: clothes, handbags, and jewelry. Other 'extras' went beyond



what might be assumed to be the limits of an employer-employee relationship: provision of computers and other equipment for employees' children and, in one case, paying for surgery for a housemaid's parent.

Such actions reflect a tacit acknowledgment and acceptance of the position conferred on employers by the state as "guardians with responsibility for the dependents in their household, including migrant domestic workers" (Elyas & Johnson, 2014), combined with a sense of Islamic duty. Several employers expressed empathy towards the situation of their migrant employees in being far from their own homes and families. In return, they took their responsibilities towards these dependent women seriously, speaking of "justice", "compassion", satisfaction in enabling these employees to help their families financially, and a wish for their happiness. In some cases, women expressed genuine affection for their housemaids, described as "valued as a member of the family" and even "like a daughter". Such quasi-familial relations (reflected also in the everyday use by employees of familial terms such as 'mama' to refer to senior women of the household) are widely reported-for example by Ayalon (Ayalon, 2009) in Israel- but also critiqued by those who point out the limitations of such relationships (Liebelt, 2011). Paradoxically, these acts of generosity on the part of Saudi employers, which are not and cannot be reciprocated by their employees (Elyas, 2011), while reflecting affection and even a certain level of 'belonging', simultaneously highlight the social distance between them.

Although the government encourages Saudi females' involvement in higher education and growing acceptance of their participation in the workforce, these forces exist alongside the perpetuation of traditional gender-based norms and ideologies, which means that, although women

are embracing new roles, they still face pressure to perform their traditional domestic and caring roles (Alotaibi, 2020). The solution has been a compromise whereby women retain responsibility for their home and children but delegate much of the work to migrant employees. The willingness of husbands (and, in one case in this study, parents) to pay for domestic help so a woman can work or study reflects a new acceptance of and respect for women's more active, public role in society and economic contribution to the household. The resultant care chains are complicating notions of power and subordination, as well as of gender, home, and family.

At the same time, the need for and value of their services gives them a specific power. The significant contribution they make to their employers' lives, practically, socially, and psychologically, has, in some cases, at least, enabled them to attract generous pay and perquisites and to exercise some influence to the benefit of other family members, both in Saudi Arabia and in the Philippines. Relations with their Saudi employers are characterized by some ambivalence fed in part by 'moral panics' that are widely discussed in both Saudi scholarly and popular culture – the migrant is still in some ways seen as a potentially suspect 'alien' influence and expected to keep a certain social distance-to "know her place", in de Regt's (De Regt, 2009) terms to be 'close' but not 'too close'. Nevertheless, there is, within these boundaries, evidence of compassion, empathy, and friendship. Thus, there are advantages and disadvantages for both sides.

Moreover, the employment of migrant workers, although an established practice (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011), is controversial in Saudi Arabia. The media discourse focuses on the undesirable customs and values purportedly introduced into the kingdom by such workers. Still, perhaps the genuine concern is that their presence reflects and

facilitates change processes in Saudi society, not least in women's roles.

## **5. Conclusion**

Over the past few decades, the employment of migrant workers, while a long-standing practice, has sparked controversy in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the social changes in the country have introduced new challenges and opportunities for Saudi women, as the apparent power lies with female employers and ultimately with their husbands.. In the current study about the relationship between Saudi working women and Filipina employees, both parties are negotiating different, non-traditional ways of performing gender and family. Saudi women are assuming more public roles, traditionally reserved for men, and striving for an equal partnership within marriage while satisfying social expectations by fulfilling their more traditional domestic roles by proxy via the employment and management of housemaids. Meanwhile, Filipina migrants are leaving their natal or marital household to the care of others, performing their own 'caring' from a distance by earning and remitting money and by saving to build the foundation for future prosperity. Meanwhile, both Saudi and Filipina women, through the renegotiation of gender roles, are investing in creating or preserving their ideals of family life.

## **Declaration and statements**

### ***Author's Contributions***

The author has contributed to the designing, executing, analyzing, and writing this article.

### ***Conflicts of Interest Statement***

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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### ***Data Availability Statement***

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

### ***Ethical Approval***

Not applicable

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