

A black and white photograph of a woman in a workshop, wearing a striped apron and looking down at a piece of paper on a table. The table is cluttered with various tools and materials. In the background, there are framed pictures on the wall, including one of a person on a horse and another of a woman in traditional attire. A yellow rectangular frame is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the main title and subtitle.

FROM  
BOARDROOMS  
TO BIENNALES:

The Rise of  
Saudi  
Women in  
Work and  
the Arts

By: Dr. Hanaa Almoaibed

# Nusf in Numbers

Over the past five years, The Arab Institute for Women's Empowerment, Nusf has achieved significant milestones in empowering women at work. Recognized as an organization to watch in advancing Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Nusf supports strong, motivated women to feel more confident and capable in the workplace.

Through tailored training programs for corporations and NGOs, Nusf has delivered over 21,000 hours of training across public/private and non-profit organizations in 6 cities. These programs are designed to equip women and stakeholders with practical skills, leadership insights, and confidence in professional environments.

Nusf also champions mentorship and community through the Walk the-Talk initiative, which has expanded to 5 cities and connected over 2,000 female mentors/mentees. In this program, rising stars are paired with accomplished women mentors for guided walks and deep conversations about career trajectories and personal growth.





In April 2025, Nusf launched its prestigious Saudi Women on Boards (SWOB) training program, designed to prepare Saudi women to step into boardroom leadership. The content was crafted to address both technical expertise and cultural nuances. This is a critical step: with only 2% of board seats held by women in Saudi Arabia, greater female representation at the highest decision-making levels is essential for addressing workplace equity and broader societal progress. This milestone was recognized through a partnership with the EU Mission to Saudi Arabia.

Now, as we launch Season 3 of the Nusf Voices podcast, we explore the role of women in the arts and culture sector—an evolving frontier where women’s contributions are reshaping narratives, industries, and identities.

# Women, Work, and Education in 2025

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 outlines a “thriving economy” where everyone has the opportunity to succeed—placing women’s economic participation at the heart of national development.

As of early 2025, 3,450,196 women are working in Saudi Arabia—the highest number ever recorded. This includes 1.63 million women registered with the General Organization for Social Insurance (GOSI) and 524,000 employed in civil service. While gender-based employment disparities persist, they have been declining steadily since the Vision’s launch in 2016.

- Saudi women’s unemployment rate (2024): 11.9%
- Decrease since 2023: 1.7%
- Decrease since 2016: 21.9%

In 2016, 36.8% of women with graduate degrees or higher were unemployed. In 2025, this figure has dropped to 14%. Women are increasingly joining diverse sectors, driven by policy reforms and shifting cultural expectations.





A 2025 study found that 62% of unemployed women are willing to commute over an hour for work, compared to 45.2% of men—a clear signal of motivation and ambition. Women now make up 54% of the 1.72 million students enrolled in Saudi higher education institutions, representing a strong future workforce.

However, gender pay disparities persist. In 2022:

- Average salary for men: SAR 8.5k
- Average salary for women: SAR 5.2k
- Even women in the highest-paying industries, such as science, tech, and human services (STH), earned SAR 7.8k—still below the male average.

In addition to employment across sectors, women are taking the reins and establishing their own companies at an unprecedented rate. A significant proportion of men and women identify as entrepreneurs (42 percent men, 34 percent women), reflecting the Kingdom's evolving business landscape.

Among those who consider themselves entrepreneurs, 44 percent of women millennials identify with this role, demonstrating strong ambition among younger generations. Women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia are increasingly embracing side hustles as a means of achieving financial independence. Notably, 47 percent of women currently engage in side businesses.

# Arts, Culture and the Saudi Economy

Fostering arts, entertainment, and cultural heritage is central to Vision 2030's aim of cultivating a vibrant society. The Kingdom has significantly expanded investment in these sectors:

- Foreign Direct Investment in AER (Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation): SAR 645 million (2022) → SAR 1.7 billion (2023)
- Industry profit growth (2023): 21%

While the arts sector remains small—employing just 0.4% of the workforce—this share is growing. Cultural mega-projects like AlUla and Diriyah exemplify how Saudi Arabia is leveraging heritage for economic and tourism development.

Events such as the Elie Saab 45th Anniversary show and the MDLBeast, Soundstorm music festival bring global talent to Saudi audiences. At the same time, festivals like Diriyah Season promote local heritage with themes such as “Entertain Your Cultural Curiosity”, featuring installations, music, theatre, dining, and souks that spotlight Saudi artists and traditions.



# Women in the Saudi Art Sector



As women's participation in the labor force rises, their presence in the arts and culture industries is driving transformation.

In 2024:

- 0.6% of Saudi women were employed in the AER sector, compared to 0.2% of men
- 138,000 Saudi women were employed in the arts

Prominent women artists are gaining international recognition. Manal AlDowayan, for instance, represented Saudi Arabia at the 2024 Venice Biennale, showcasing photography and installation that explored the role of women. Her *Tree of Guardians* is now featured in Riyadh's *Art of the Kingdom* exhibit.

The 2025 Diriyah Islamic Arts Biennale featured works from three female artists—*Nour Joaouda*, *Charwei Tsai*, and *Fatmah Abdulhadi*—alongside 17 male artists, continuing a trend of growing, though still uneven, representation.

# Cultural Labor, Entrepreneurship, and the Recognition of Domestic Arts

Women's roles in the domestic and reproductive arts—like cooking, sewing, and crafts—have historically been overlooked. Yet today, they're gaining national cultural attention. Socio-political discourses have often posited the distribution of reproductive labour such as cooking, sewing and home-crafts as barriers to gender parity, yet these very practices are currently enjoying national attention and cultural investment through initiatives by the Kingdom.

When considering the cultural and artistic landscape of Saudi and the recent projects of the Ministry of Culture, professional and casualized 'women's art' is of undeniable importance. Recent reporting highlights 'cooking' as the most popular cultural activity engaged in by the Saudi public, 20.4% participating regularly, far ahead of the following 'fine art' (9.7%). The love for cooking has translated into work opportunities for women, and the ecosystem at large: According to data from the Small and Medium Enterprises General Authority (Monsha'at), the number of women-owned establishments within this sector reached 59,800 in 2024, accounting for 49.7 percent of the total establishments.





Further analysis of the accommodation and food service sector reveals a workforce of approximately 712,000 individuals in 2024. This workforce is distributed across various enterprise sizes, including 250,000 employees in micro-enterprises, 258,600 in small enterprises, 115,000 in medium-sized enterprises, and 88,000 in large enterprises. Such figures not only highlight the sector's substantial contribution to employment but also indicate that women entrepreneurs are shaking up this cultural sector.

Complementing these developments, the Ministry of Commerce reported a notable 48 percent increase in the issuance of commercial registrations during the first quarter of 2025 compared to the same period in the previous year. This surge resulted in the issuance of over 154,000 new commercial registrations, elevating the total to more than 1.68 million across all regions of Saudi Arabia. These figures reflect a broader national momentum towards economic diversification and the increasing inclusion of women in the entrepreneurial landscape.

The Ministry of Culture designated 2025 as the Year of Handicrafts, highlighting art forms passed down through generations, such as:

- Al-Qatt Al-Asiri – geometric wall painting
- Sadu weaving – traditional Bedouin textiles

These practices are often matrilineally taught and rooted in women's lived experiences. Artist Hams Al-Mureh, for example, learned Al-Qatt through time spent with her grandmother and now reinterprets it with modern techniques.

This intersection of heritage, storytelling, and innovation is a critical space where women continue to lead.

Despite progress, key issues persist: Women in AER work an average of 41+ hours/week and gender pay gaps remain unaddressed. Women remain underrepresented at the highest levels of artistic recognition and leadership. As the Kingdom deepens investment in culture as a pillar of national identity, inclusion, and economic vitality, equitable recognition and compensation for women must follow. It through the work at Nusf that we can continue to raise awareness about these challenges and collaborate with others to enable women to face these barriers head on.



# Spotlight: Sawsan Albahiti and the Power of Voice

In the inaugural episode of Nusf Voices Season 3—produced in collaboration with Johara Global—we sit down with Saudi Arabia’s first soprano, Sawsan AlBahiti, a pioneering voice in every sense of the word. AlBahiti represents the bold new artistic generation emerging within the Kingdom, where rapid structural change has unlocked unprecedented opportunities for musicians, performers, and creatives. Her rise to prominence has been shaped by a blend of personal talent and institutional support. In 2024, she starred in Zarqa AlYamama, Saudi Arabia’s first Arabic grand opera, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture’s Theater and Performing Arts Commission. The production—staged at the King Fahad Cultural Center in Riyadh—was a cultural milestone, bringing together Saudi and international talent and introducing operatic storytelling to local audiences on a grand scale.

AlBahiti’s involvement in this historic production marked a new chapter in her artistic journey. Soon after, she was awarded a prestigious scholarship by the Saudi Music Commission to undertake an intensive year-long opera training program in Italy.

Her studies began at La Fabbrica in Teatro dell’Opera di Roma and continued at the Milan Conservatory, two of the most esteemed institutions in European classical music. Through this immersive experience, Sawsan refined her vocal technique, expanded her repertoire, and built connections with global opera circles—culminating in performances alongside icons such as Andrea Bocelli.

In her interview with Dr. Hanaa Almoaibed, VP of Research at Nusf, AlBahiti reflects candidly on the deeply personal decision to leave behind a conventional career in pursuit of her artistic passion. She discusses the cultural and emotional challenges of forging a nontraditional path in a society where such choices can still attract skepticism. She also speaks about managing performance anxiety, channeling vulnerability into expression, and using her voice to tell the story of Saudi Arabia to the world. Through AlBahiti’s lens, we see how systemic change can intersect with personal bravery to create something truly transformative. Tune into the episode wherever you listen to your podcasts to hear this inspiring and deeply human conversation, or watch it on our newly launched YouTube channel.



# Conclusion

From boardrooms to biennales, from handicrafts to high opera, Saudi women are shaping the future. Nusf's initiatives have created space for women to lead, learn, and leave a mark—not just in offices, but in cultural legacies. Yet, the work continues.

By supporting professional development, mentorship, and collaboration, we remain committed to making equity not just a vision—but a reality.



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