

## Saudi Arabian Students' Opinions About Co-Education While Studying Abroad

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### Abstract

This paper investigates a sample of Saudi Arabian students' opinions about the effects of mixed-gender education on their academic experiences in the West. Although co-education is still illegal in Saudi Arabia's schools and universities, there is an intense cultural debate in Saudi society on the topic. This study used a quantitative method with a 16-item Likert-type scale, and two open-ended questions. One hundred and ten Saudi students (29 females) who were attending mixed-gender universities in the West participated in the survey. The duration of their study ranged from less than 3 months to over 1 year. The findings of the survey show marked differences in views held by males and females. Experiencing co-education firsthand confirmed the conviction of a majority of Saudi students, both males and females, that a single-sex setting is preferred to a mixed-gender one. Saudi females were in general more receptive than males to mixed-gender education.

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**Keywords:** co-education, gender, co-educational conditions, preconceptions, classroom conditions

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### INTRODUCTION

Co-education is illegal in Saudi Arabia's schools and universities. However, in September 2009, the Saudi monarch inaugurated the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which espouses mixed-gender education. Although this innovation garnered praise from liberal circles, it received strong criticism from the majority of Saudi Arabia's conservative clerics who opined that this university was attempting to change the Islamic character of Saudi Arabia (*Saudi Gazette*, 25 February 2010). They believe that any change must start from where others have stopped, and argued that mixed-gender settings in Western schools have failed. Some academic research and reports in the media posit that a single-sex environment is better for either males or females, or both (see for example SCHEMO, 2006).

The debate continues between the two sides. Newspapers controlled by liberal-minded intellectuals have been accused by religious people of presenting only opinions that are consistent with their liberal views (for example, Saman, 2010). Conversely, liberals often claim that mosques and religious Internet sites are used to incite people against liberal ideas, and some religious leaders continue to express hostile views. Sheikh Abdulrahman Al-Barrak said that anyone who believes co-education, which leads to moral evils, is not illegal under Islamic law is an apostate. Newspapers severely criticized the charges of apostasy (*Saudi Gazette*, 25 February 2010).

The survey described here was undertaken during this tense period. After the daring decision of the Saudi monarch to inaugurate KAUST and dismiss a ranking member of the religious establishment, another trial of co-education was implemented in September 2011 at Alfaisal University in Riyadh. However, a keen effort was made to cater to the tenets of the conservative culture of Saudi Arabia. The classes include female and male students in the same lecture hall, but with the females physically separated from the males by seating them in an elevated balcony above the males' seating area. In this arrangement, the educators strived to give both groups the same level and experience of instruction, and student-instructor, student-student interaction opportunities, without allowing actual visual or physical contact between the two sexes. This has enabled the nonprofit private university to reduce infrastructure costs such as laboratories, lecture space, libraries, and building space.

There are a number of international studies and media reports on the topic of single-sex/co-education; however, most are focused on K12 education. Three main opinions emerge from these studies. The first is that co-educational learning environments are happier, friendlier, more pleasant, and more gregarious than single-sex schools, but there are contradictions regarding whether these positive aspects come at the expense of academic performance. Second, there are assertions that single-sex institutions are more successful academically for

both males and females. Some researchers in this group think the better option is single-sex classes within co-educational schools. The third opinion is that there is no difference in achievement between single- and mixed-sex settings (Yates, 2002).

Although Saudi students in a co-educational setting are an ideal sample for a study on the perceived effects of co-education, few studies have investigated this segregated population. The most important study is a Master's dissertation prepared at the University of Sana'a by Al-Otaibi entitled "Attitudes of Saudi university students toward co-education: the reality of the present and future prospects." (in Arabic, 2009) The aim of this study was to describe the attitudes of students of King Saud University and King Abdul Aziz University toward co-education. It also aimed to disclose the impact of gender on the attitudes of students toward mixed-gender education. The general trend of the sample's viewpoints on co-education was characterized as positive. Results indicate a growing belief in the importance of mixing genders as a positive influence in academic, social, economic, and religious areas, promoting an equal, positive role for men and women in society. Results revealed no statistically significant differences between the opinions of male and female students in their attitudes toward co-education. However, through arithmetic means it was shown that male students are more inclined toward mixed-gender education than female students are.

In a qualitative research project titled "From Riyadh to Portland: The Study Abroad Experiences of Five Saudi Arabian Female Students," Kampman (2011) studied the behavior of five female Saudi Arabian college students enrolled in a summer program at Portland State University in the United States. The main question asked was "How did the Saudi students adapt to the teaching methods in their courses?" (Kampman, 2011, p.17). The paper investigated the challenges students encountered and their efforts to understand and overcome these challenges. In "Why Single-Sex Schools? Discourses of culture/faith and achievement," Shah and Conchar (2009) examined the influence of single-sex schooling on educational achievement, specifically among male students, and the impact of culture/faith in demanding single-sex schools, especially on females. They found that there is less support for the single-sex environment from young people, and those born in Britain as well as from females within the same faith/ethnic groups. In addition, there was "intra-group variation of opinions pointing to power relations with regard to gender in certain social structures, emerging resistance to those structures, and changing attitudes and priorities of the very young and British-born" (Shah and Conchar, 2009, p. 201).

To address an aspect of this challenging issue, this paper poses three main questions: 1) What are Saudi Arabian students' opinions about the effects of co-education following their time spent studying at Western universities? 2) Are there any differences between the responses of males and females? 3) After their study in a mixed-gender environment, do Saudi Arabian students support implementing co-education in Saudi Arabia? In posing these questions we are striving to contribute to establishing the crucial debate on coeducation in Saudi Arabia on solid academic and scientific grounds.

## HYPOTHESES

It can be opined that co-education has both positive and negative effects. This paper investigates those effects as viewed by Saudi students. It was hypothesized that Saudi students at the university level are taught from childhood to have negative feelings about mixed-gender education, and thus will oppose it despite participating in it by choice in the West. Furthermore, this paper addresses the question of whether gender influences opinions about co-education effects. The researcher speculated that most Saudi women, who are committed to wearing *al-hijab* (a modest Muslim style of dress), or the more restrictive *niqab* (covering of the face), would have more negative feelings about co-education than males. This particular hypothesis stems from the fact that women in a single-sex educational setting do not, in the majority of circumstances, have to adhere to the discomforts of the burdensome clothing. Consequently, they would be more opposed to co-education even though they experience the worst part of gender segregation, both physically and academically. In addition, this paper investigates the social conditions that Saudi students prefer within a mixed-gender environment. The researcher assumed that Saudi students have negative preconceptions about co-education, some of which are based on religious teachings which posit that co-education is one of the most prominent causes of moral decay. However, the researcher also speculated that most of the students would change their preconceptions after their experiences at Western universities. The aims of this paper are therefore as follows:

1. To investigate the opinions of Saudi Arabian students about the effects of co-education and to determine if there are differences in opinions between females and males.
2. To define what social arrangements do Saudi students prefer in a co-educational setting.
3. To investigate whether opinions of these students changed after their experience with mixed-gender education at Western universities.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

One hundred and ten Saudi students participated in the survey. As Figure 1 shows, the student sample was composed of 29 females (26.4%), and 81 males

(73.6%). Fifty-eight were single (52.7%), and 52 were married (47.3%). Ninety-five students (86.4%) were studying in Britain; 15 students (13.6%) were studying in other countries. Ages ranged from 17–22 years (11 students, 10%), 23–29 years (72, 65.5%), and 30–40 years (27, 24.5%). Regarding duration of study in a mixed-gender setting, 11 students (10%) had been there for less than 3 months, nine (8.2%) for 4–6 months, 21 (19.1%) for 7–12 months, and 69 students (62.7%) for more than 1 year.

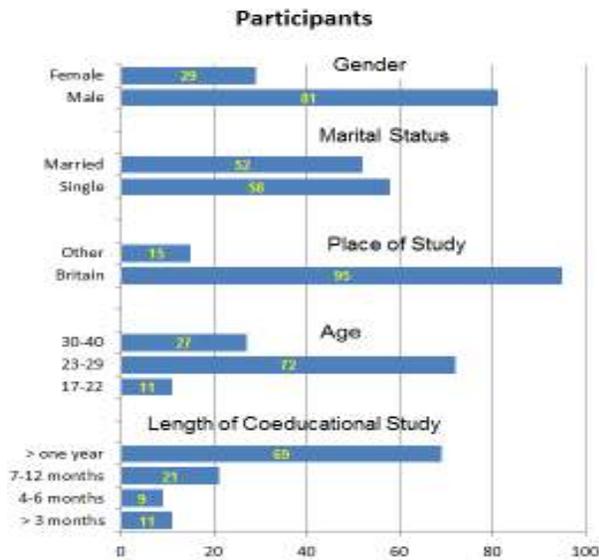


Fig. 1: Overview of Participants

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

A questionnaire was used (Appendix 1) to measure the opinions of the students about the main effects of mixed-gender education. The effects this questionnaire investigated were derived from articles written about co-education (e.g. Lee and Bryk, 1986; Yates, 2001, 2002; Carter, 2005; Shah and Conchar, 2009) and from the ongoing debate in Saudi Arabia about this issue. The questionnaire was divided into three sections. The first had items requesting personal information about the participants, including gender, marital status, study location, age, and duration of co-educational study. The second, which constituted the main body of the questionnaire, included 15 statements about co-education with five answering options arranged in a Likert-type scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The third section comprised two open essay questions about the positive and negative effects of co-education.

**PROCEDURE**

The questionnaire was placed prominently on the Website of Essex University, where the study was conducted, and Saudi students enrolled at the University of Essex in Colchester, Britain were invited to participate. Then, using a website that

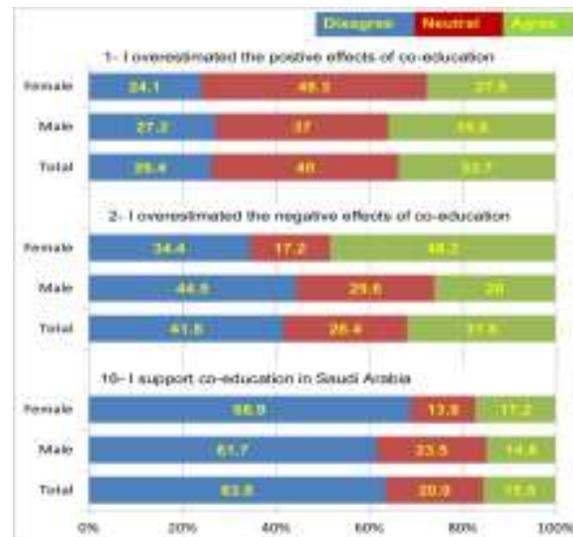
specializes in Saudi scholarships (Mbt3th), the researcher invited all Saudi Arabian students at all Western universities to participate from 3–28 May 2010.

**RESULTS**

The objective of this investigation was to study the influence of the mixed gender education experiences in Western Universities on Saudi students’ views regarding its academic, social, and ethical aspects, and to determine if there were differences between the responses of males and females, with a variance of 10% or more considered significant. Results for the questionnaire items can be divided as follows:

**Preconceptions**

The first aim of the study was to determine if the outlook of Saudi students changed after experiencing co-educational settings firsthand. The first and second questions were designed to measure students’ preconceptions about co-education. A total of 33.7% of the sample felt they had overestimated the positive effects, and 40% had neutral feelings (48.3% of females and 37% of males) (Figure 2). On the other hand, 31.8% (48.2% of females and 26% of males) felt they had overestimated the negative effects of co-education. Responses to the specific question about support of implementing co-education in Saudi Arabia revealed that 63.6% of the entire sample was against implementing co-education. Only 15.5% agreed with the idea (Figure 2).



**Non-Educational Impact**

*Cultural, social and ethical influences*

For the specific questions about non-educational influences, the survey revealed the following results, shown in Figure 3.

- a) Sixty-six percent of participants (70.4% of males and 55.1% of females) agreed and 19.1% disagreed that co-education contributes to illicit relations between the sexes.

- b) Fifty-eight percent (44.8% of females and 63% of males) believed that women are forced to give up some of their moral convictions in a co-educational setting.
- c) Regarding co-education contributing to the achievement of gender equality, 34.6% (44.8% of females and 30.9% of males) were in agreement compared with 49.1% who disagreed (37.9% of females and 53.1% of males).
- d) A total of 51% (72.4% of females and 43.2% of males) felt co-education helped them better understand the opposite sex.

**General Psychological and Economic Influence**

Although questions 5 and 14 are simple, they focus on the debate surrounding co-education in Saudi Arabia. As shown in Figure 4, 60.4% of the sample (48.3% of females and 63.9% of males) agreed that co-education causes too much attention to be paid to personal appearances. Consequently, they spent more money on clothes and makeup. A total of 60.9% of participants disagreed that they felt less self-confident in a co-educational setting.

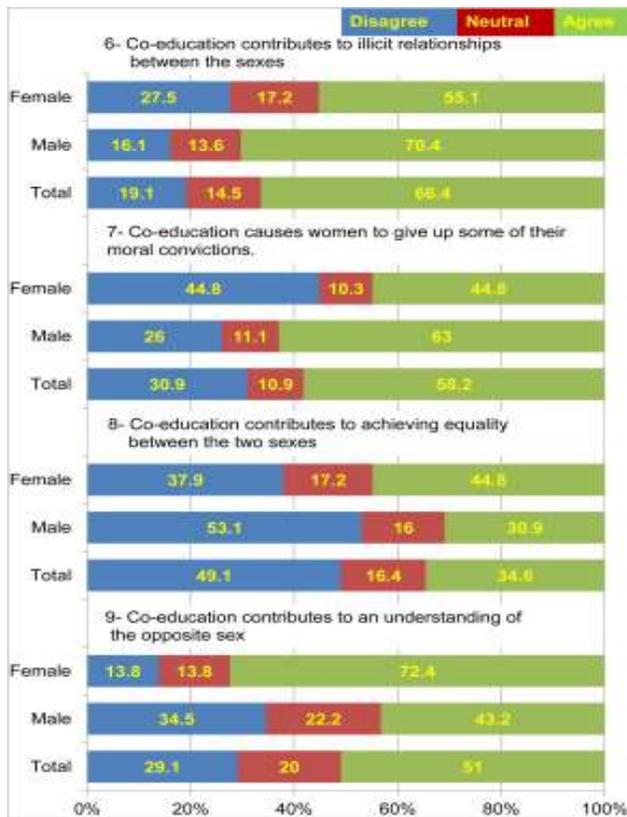


Fig. 3: Non-educational Impact: Cultural, Social, Ethical Influence

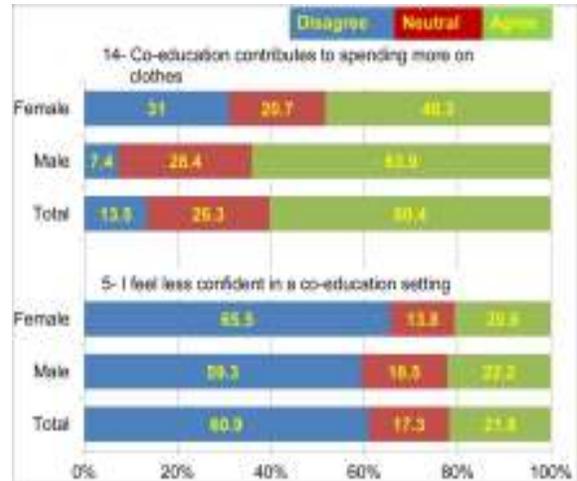


Fig. 4: Psychological and economic results

**Classroom Conditions**

Classroom conditions are a primary concern for any educational institution. This part of the questionnaire had four statements regarding these conditions. A total of 52.7% of the sample felt that co-education limited debate and interaction in classrooms (Figure 5).

There were 38.2% who agreed they were more fearful of ridicule by the opposite gender in class compared with 43.7% who disagreed. Furthermore, 41.4% of females felt the opposite sex were more controlling of interaction in classrooms compared with 26% of males. Finally, 44.6% of participants (55.2% of females and 40.7% of males) agreed that co-education created positive competition conditions while 38.2% disagreed (Figure 5)

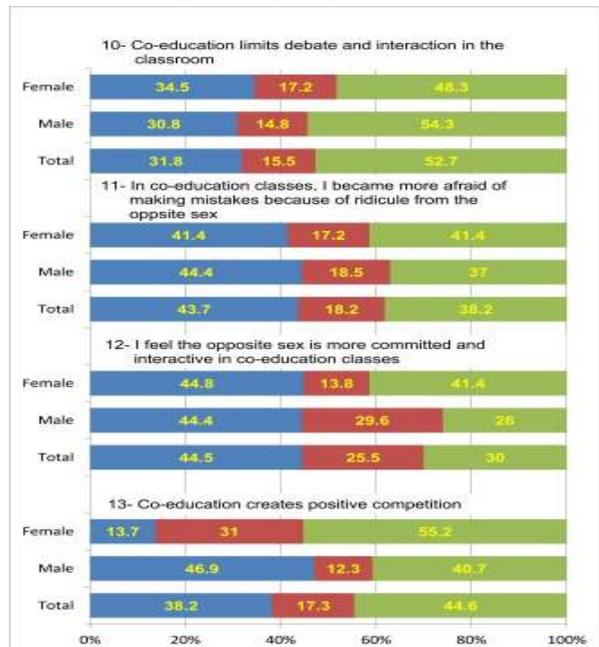
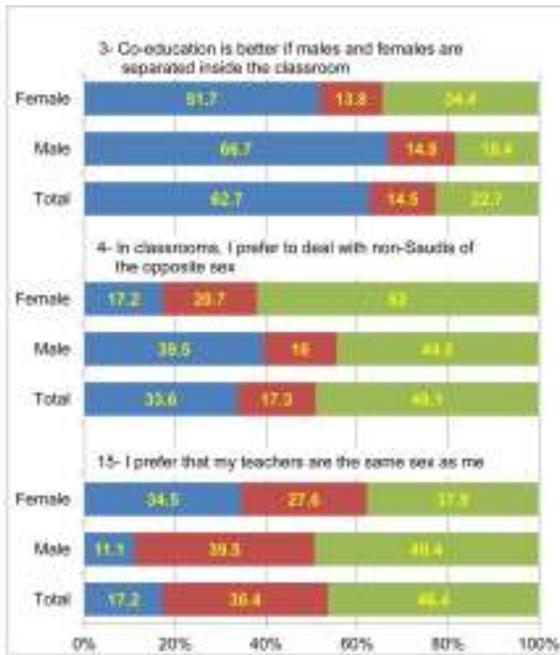


Fig. 5: Classroom conditions results

**Favorite Classroom Environment**

A set of three statements had the aim of identifying the conditions Saudi students prefer in a co-educational setting. On the question of the benefits of directly co-seating the two genders in the classroom, 62.7% did not agree (51.7% of females and 66.7% of males) that co-education is better if males and females are separated inside classrooms (Figure 6). A total of 49.1% (62% of women and 44.5% of men) preferred to deal with non-Saudis of the opposite sex in the classroom, while 46.4% (37.9% of females and



49.4% of males) preferred for their teachers to be the same gender as themselves, compared with 17.2% who disagreed with this preference (Figure 6).

**DISCUSSION**

This study addressed three questions regarding co-education for Saudi students. The first was related to the effects of such an educational setting. Results indicate that both negative and positive effects were perceived.

- 1- Psychological effect: Participants denied that co-education causes them to feel less confident. Thus, psychologically, co-education may not have a direct effect on Saudi students.
- 2- Moral effects: A total of 70.4% of males and 55.1% of females felt that a mixed-gender setting contributes to illicit relationships between men and women, which are considered morally and religiously unacceptable in Saudi Arabian society. In addition, 63% of males thought that women relinquish some of their moral convictions by agreeing to be in the same learning space as men, perhaps causing psychological and social damage, and 44.8% of females agreed. Responses to these two

questions showed that men’s opinions about effects on women who study in mixed-gender settings are more negative than women’s views.

- 3- Cultural effects: Females felt more than males that mixed-gender education helps the sexes achieve gender equality, particularly for females. In addition, two females wrote in the open questions that co-education made them feel more confident and open-minded.
- 4- Social effects: A total of 72.4% of females thought co-education helped them understand the opposite sex. Saudi women, in general, have a limited understanding of men because they live under strict segregation. Saudi men are more experienced in dealing with women because they can often travel to other societies and meet both men and women. In general, a woman in Saudi Arabia cannot establish a relationship of friendship or fellowship with men except with her close male relatives (father and brothers). Therefore, the males did not see that co-education helps them better understand women. In addition, males may be more actively involved in classes than females. Two females wrote in the open questions that men were more committed and talkative in class.
- 5- Educational effects: Despite the belief that Saudi women are generally more inhibited than men, the percentage of females who thought co-education limits debate and interaction in classes was lower than the percentage of males. In addition, although most females thought co-education creates positive competition, 41.4% of them saw males as more interactive in the classroom than females. This could mean that females see co-education more positively than males who did not find real incentives for such an educational setting. Furthermore, 11 participants, all males, indicated in their answers to the open questions that co-education distracts their focus because of preoccupation with the presence the females in the class.
- 6- Economic effect: Although women in Saudi Arabia generally spend large amounts of money on their clothes and cosmetics (Alzeer, 2001), the questionnaire showed that the males were more interested in buying clothes than females. This may be because females in mixed-gender universities are committed to the veil. Therefore, they did not need to buy jewelry and other accessories. Men in Saudi Arabia usually wear *thoubas*, traditional clothes, which are often inexpensive. Therefore, at mixed-gender universities, men spend more than they usually spend on their clothes in Saudi Arabia.

The second purpose of the survey was to define conditions that Saudi students prefer in co-educational classrooms. Regarding the statement that “co-education is better if males and females are

separated inside classrooms,” the researcher speculated that most students would not want separation of the sexes in classes. However, after discussions with nine participants, it was found that they did not agree, not because they reject separation within the classroom, but because they thought the statement confirmed that co-education would be better than single-sex education if this happened, and they did not think that was the case. In addition, most females preferred to deal with non-Saudis in the classroom. However, the explanation of this issue is complex. Perhaps women see Saudi men as morally judgmental, and are more likely to report their social activities to their families. Therefore, when around them, they would have to be very conscious about their behavior to avoid any improper interpretations. Moreover, more than a third of the females did not prefer female teachers, while most males preferred male teachers.

The third aim of this paper was to investigate whether preconceptions about co-education changed. Responses to the first statement regarding whether students overestimated the positive effects of co-education revealed that 40% of participants were neutral (48.3% of females and 37% of males). It is possible that most Saudi students do not have positive preconceptions about co-education because the debate in Saudi Arabia about this issue does not show the advantages of co-education, if any, and focuses instead on disadvantages. Thus, nine participants stated in replies to open questions that co-education does not have any advantages. However, a quarter of males thought they had overestimated the negative effects of co-education, compared with nearly half of females. The final statement of the survey was about supporting co-education in Saudi Arabia. A total of 63.6% were against it (54.4% of them strongly disagreed) compared with only 15.5% who supported it. This means that both males and females did not want enforcement of co-education in Saudi Arabia, perhaps because they want stability of the Islamic identity of Saudi Arabia or because their real views about co-education are negative. In addition, they may be afraid of a change that will cause damage, especially at the onset of co-education, as one participant wrote in the open question section. As a result, Saudi students generally did not change their preconceptions about this issue. On the contrary, negative preconceptions were reconfirmed by observations and experiences.

This research reveals differences between males and females on this issue, showing that females were more receptive to the idea of co-education than males. This may be because the respondent sample was skewed towards more liberal women because very conservative families do not send their daughters to Western universities, or the result might

mean that Saudi women are more enthusiastic about change.

A limitation of this study is that some participants may not have responded according to their real observations about co-education, but according to their own beliefs, religious and cultural. For instance, if there were religiously conservative students who disagreed with the idea of co-education, they might have ignored the positives and focused on the negatives. Conversely, if they supported co-education, they might have disregarded the disadvantages and emphasized the advantages. However, the size of the sample may have reduced this possible effect.

### CONCLUSION

This paper measured Saudi students' opinions about the effects of co-education, including social, educational, economic, and cultural effects. Students reported more negative than positive effects. This research revealed that Saudi women who wear the *hijab* and sometimes the *niqab/burqa* (the veil) are more receptive to the idea of co-education than Saudi men, who are often seen as more open and flexible. However, most Saudi females preferred to deal with non-Saudi males, teachers, and classmates, and more than a third of them did not prefer female instructors. Generally, both males and females rejected the idea of enforcing co-education in Saudi Arabia, which means their experience of mixed-gender education did not change their opinions. For instance, one of the participants wrote in response to one of the open questions, “I had thought that the clerics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia exaggerated the negative aspects about co-education, but I found out they did not show all the disadvantages.” Given the sensitivity and importance of this issue in Saudi Arabia, further studies to investigate student attitudes toward co-education are needed.

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