



Universidade do Minho
Escola de Economia e Gestão

“Rebranding Saudi Arabia: Genderwashing as the New Soft Power”

In contemporary international relations, soft power has become an essential tool for states seeking to enhance their global standing, and while traditionally associated with democratic values and cultural diplomacy, authoritarian regimes have increasingly adopted soft power strategies to improve their international image. One such mechanism is genderwashing, a practice in which states promote selective gender equality reforms to appear progressive while maintaining systemic inequalities. The present study seeks to answer the following research question: **How has Saudi Arabia used genderwashing as a soft power tool to improve its international image?**

To achieve this, the present study adopts a qualitative process-tracing methodology, focusing on the period from 2016 to 2024. Through the examination of official policy documents, government discourse, media portrayals, and international responses, it is possible to identify the mechanisms by which genderwashing is operationalized as a nation branding and soft power strategy. This approach allows for a structured analysis of narrative construction, policy framing, and the selective promotion of reforms in shaping international perceptions of Saudi Arabia.

The research also adopts a Critical Feminist International Relations approach, which critiques the instrumentalization of gender narratives in global politics. Drawing on Tickner (1992) and Cîrstocea et al. (2019), it investigates how authoritarian states co-opt gender equality rhetoric for political gain. Additionally, Nye’s (2008) concept of soft power and Fan’s (2010) nation branding framework provide insights into how Saudi Arabia strategically shapes global perceptions through controlled narratives and selective reforms.

The expected findings will outline the specific strategies and processes Saudi Arabia employs to integrate gender reforms into its broader soft power agenda. The research will highlight how policy discourse, public diplomacy, and media representation are used to enhance credibility and attract international support. By mapping these mechanisms, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how authoritarian states leverage gender narratives in global governance.

Keywords:

Saudi Arabia, genderwashing, soft power

Matilde Faria (PG53402)