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Rebranding Saudi Arabia: Genderwashing as the New Soft Power Tool

ABSTRACT: The present dissertation has as its main objective to showcase how Saudi Arabia has used genderwashing as a soft power tool to improve its international image, from 2016 to 2024. To this end, it explores the interconnection between rebranding and soft power, focusing on Vision 2030 governmental program and its role in repositioning the country as a rising power in the international arena. Genderwashing, a strategy that can be described as the promotion of selective gender reforms while maintaining systemic inequalities, has become a key element in this process. This study draws upon the Critical Feminist Theory and Bjarnegård and Zetterberg's 'autocratic genderwashing' framework to trace Saudi Arabia's genderwashing strategy through the analysis of official policy documents, government discourse, medial portrayals and international responses to the new gender policies in the Kingdom. The research findings reveal that Saudi Arabia employs all the following key genderwashing mechanisms identified in the literature: a) symbolic representation, where token women are placed in leadership roles without systemic change; b) superficial policies, which appear progressive but lack meaningful implementation; c) gender equality as a marketing strategy, used to enhance credibility; d) gender equality as a distraction, diverting attention from other human rights violations; and e) manipulation of religion to deflect criticism and mask repressive practices, where gender inequality is framed as a religious issue, rather than a political choice. As such, this dissertation concludes that Saudi Arabia has strategically leveraged genderwashing to gain legitimacy and achieve its major international objectives.

Keywords: Genderwashing; Rebranding; Saudi Arabia; Soft Power; Saudi Vision 2030

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