M-government and Women’s Empowerment: Case Study of Saudi Women

1. INTRODUCTION
- For many years, electronic services have been provided by the government of KSA (e-government) to provide efficient and effective services to the public. Such services have begun migrating to mobile platforms (m-government).
- More studies are needed to examine women and m-government, especially in the MENA region where the influence of Islam strongly shapes gender roles.
- Considering this, our study asks: How do women use m-government to empower themselves? We interview women in the KSA, and examine social, economic and political opportunities arising from their use of m-government services.
- We employ the Capability Approach as the theoretical lens, as it argues for greater freedom of women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 M-Government and Women’s Empowerment
- Within the MENA region, and specifically the KSA, there is a paucity of research investigating the role of either e- or m-government for the empowerment of women. Saudi studies on m-government have focused mainly on the adoption or acceptance of m-government by both genders (Alrowili et al., 2015; Alobaidi & Roussinov, 2017; Alonazi et al., 2019). More importantly, scholars use quantitative methods, such as surveys, and focus on the single aspect of gender gap in m-government access. Such approaches do not help with understanding how women in this region are using m-government to improve their lives in light of significant social restrictions (Moussa & Seraphim, 2017).

3. SEN’S CAPABILITY APPROACH
- The CA framework is specifically suited to the context of our study due to its focus on social change enhancing individual wellbeing (Robeyns, 2016). The CA framework consists of two elements. Capabilities are the freedoms or opportunities an individual has to attain a set of ‘functions’ (valued achievements) (Sen, 1999, p. 18).

4. METHODOLOGY
- We conducted virtual interviews with 30 Saudi women with the aim of understanding their use of m-government services and whether and how such services aid empowerment. Who were:
  - Over eighteen.
  - Mobile phone owners.
  - M-government users.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS
5.1 Commodities
- A programme called ‘Yesser’ was launched with the aim of delivering information through electronic channels.
- ‘Absher’ delivers government services such as visa renewal visas, passports and driving licences, among others.

5.2 Capabilities
- Several capabilities were elicited, as follows:
  5.2.1 Opportunities for Mobility and Economic Activity
  5.2.2 Opportunities for Self-Identification
  5.2.3 Opportunities for Better Education and Voicing Concerns

5.1 Conversion Factors
- Cultural as (Custom & tradition, male refusal to change)
- Religious

6. CONCLUSION
- The study findings show that the use of m-government services empowers women in respect of mobility, economic activities, health care, education and having a voice. However, these empowerments were hindered by social conversion factors such as religious belief, tradition and customs. It remains to be seen whether women will enjoy greater empowerment in the future.
- In the context of this study, the obstacle was lack of access to resources, as Saudi women were not allowed to access m-government services without male permission before 2019.
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Norah Humus Alotaibi, The University of Sheffield, nhmalotaibi1@sheffield.ac.uk. | Dr Salihu Dasuki, The University of Sheffield, s.dasuki@sheffield.ac.uk. | Dr Efpraxia Zamani, The University of Sheffield, e.zamani@sheffield.ac.uk