

Contemporary Women's Activism and Reform in Saudi Arabia

Throughout the years, the West has painted a rather bleak picture of Saudi Arabia. Whether based on facts or purely sensationalized, Saudi women are understood as being deprived of basic human rights. We have heard of women's liberation movements throughout the Arab world, but Saudi Arabia, with its mysterious niqab-clad women, is seen as the last frontier. In my research, I am particularly interested in women's movements, activism, and reforms in Saudi Arabia. Although I am unable to provide a thorough analysis of women's activism, both past and present due to limited space, I will nonetheless highlight recent reforms and movements that are contributing to Saudi women's gradual empowerment. I will begin by pointing to key factors that may help to explain Saudi women's lesser emancipation compared to other Arab women. I will then describe recent activism and reforms, contributing to women's independence and empowerment. With the help of this research, I wish to address the issue of women's bodies, as sites where tradition is both upheld and contested. Indeed, the struggle for women's empowerment and reform in Saudi Arabia highlights that emancipation is hardly about the repression of women; rather, it involves religion, tradition, and a conservative social order.

Delays in Emancipation for Saudi Women

My aim in this paper is not to present the lengthy history of this fascinating country but rather to demonstrate that the Saudi nation was founded as a beacon of Islam. The founding of the nation varied greatly from other Arab countries as it was essentially free of anti-colonial and secular movements. Often, nationalist and anti-colonial discourse, like that of

Egypt for example, ultimately leads to a discussion of women's status within that nation, as they are considered sites for the modernization or regression of nations. However, as mentioned, Saudi Arabia was founded as the beacon of Islam and a proprietor of its most sacred sites. Upon amalgamating various tribes to create one Kingdom, the intent was to create "cosmopolitan Islamic communities among whom the bond of Islam rather than ethnicity of nationalism prevailed."¹ Within the nation, women are pillars of the faith, symbols marking the boundaries of the state, distinguishing Saudi Arabia from the rest of the world. They are portrayed as "Godly women,"² representing the Islamic state and upholding Islamic laws and values. As such, Saudi Arabia encourages a Wahhabi religious nationalism.

The nation complies with the Wahhabi school of thought, the most restrictive of Islamic schools. Adhering to Wahhabi-Hanbali jurisprudence, Saudi Arabia applies the most conservative laws concerning matters of birth, marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody.

Within this system women have remained, both metaphorically and legally, the property of men.³ Further, guardianship regulations have severely restricted women's movements, both within and outside the country. There are numerous regulations and restrictions affecting

¹ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13

² *Ibid.*, 17

³ Soraya Altorki, "The Concept and Practice of Citizenship in Saudi Arabia", in *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, ed. Suad Joseph, 215-236 (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 224

Saudi women's lives, contributing to their exclusion and subordination at legal, social, political and economic levels. Further, "interaction between state, religious nationalism, social and cultural forms of patriarchy"⁴ has enabled Saudi women's extreme seclusion.

Also, in Islam, motherhood remains the most meritorious role for women. The family system is of extreme importance; thus the maintenance of this social system and kinship ties are essential. Although the Saudi woman may be presented with various opportunities for self-fulfillment in recent reforms, these may never interfere with her role as a mother and wife.

Reform Within the Kingdom

Women's increased participation in debates on gender equality and conversations of dissent regarding their social status is not new to the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia. Indeed, as mentioned by Madawi Al-Rasheed, Professor of Anthropology of Religion at King's College, women were gradually involved into Saudi Arabian life, beginning with their inclusion in education in the 1960s.⁵ Further, some have expressed their concerns, and continue to do so, through literature and poetry. However, this small grouping of women's voices remained largely unheard in the cacophony of patriarchy.

The late King Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz was instrumental in leading the way towards Saudi women's empowerment. Some have pointed to the recent surge of government-sanctioned reforms as a response to heightened attention and criticism of women's status within Arab states. Following the events of 9/11 and continued worldwide terror attacks by Islamic extremists, the world turned its gaze on Islamic women and increasingly questioned their status. However, Naomi Sakr, a Media Policy scholar at the University of Westminster,

stresses that reforms within the Kingdom were initiated prior to the 9/11 attacks, most beginning in the 1990s.

Further, Saudi Arabia signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2000. Although the government had several restrictions concerning their adherence to the Convention, "it signed the convention for reasons that seemed to be related to a bid for increased foreign investment and membership of the World Trade Organization."⁶ Further, the reorganization of the nation-state following the Gulf War in 1991 has encouraged the Saudi Arabian government to increase women's participation in Saudi life, economically, politically and socially.⁷ In building a strong nation-state, the vision seems to be one of unity, with women's involvement seen as particularly beneficial as they account for a large percentage of the population.

In 2004, the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue held the Third National Dialogue Meeting. Specifically concentrating on women's issues, the meeting included four main themes: women and their rights and obligations; women and work; women and the society; and women's education. However, the discourses reinforced women's roles within their families. Also, although it did open dialogue and exposed women's issues, the proposed 'plan' was criticized by many female activists as no actual official plans were put forward. However, the media was encouraged to par-

⁴ Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 19.

⁵ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*,

⁶ Naomi Sakr, "Women and Media in Saudi Arabia: Changes and Contradictions," *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations*, 23 Sept, 2009, <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/0000001457>

⁷ Altorki, "The Concept and Practice of Citizenship in Saudi Arabia,"

ticipate and broadcast the meetings, bringing women's issues into the mass media. As a consequence, there is now a growing sense of "women's presence as subjects of media stories."⁸

Interestingly, King Abdullah instructed members of the mass media not to bring too much attention to women's issues, for fear that it would cause a conservative backlash.⁹ This points to yet another hindrance on the road to modernization: the historically strong ties between the Kingdom and the clergy. Patriarchy may not simply be subverted, nor can conservative Islamic voices upholding Wahhabi religious nationalism be silenced. Historically, restrictions applied to women's economic, social and political participation have been legitimized by referring to 'tradition'. However, tradition is a broad concept and leaders may choose to reference it whenever they want to stunt women's increased participation in Saudi life. Hence, in the midst of reform and optimism, tradition is never far away.

What was initially seen as lip service from the King has concretized in actual reforms. In 2011, King Abdullah granted women the right to vote and run in municipal elections by 2015.

Further, he gave women the right to be appointed to the consultative Shura Council, a council that holds no real decision making power but is responsible for advising the King. The decision was praised by most. As expressed by *The Saudi Gazette*,

The King's announcement confirms that the modernization project in the Kingdom is a non-stop process because of the determination of the nation's leaders that building the country depends upon the use of Saudi national resources whether they are women or men.¹⁰

In 2013, the King appointed 30 women to join the 150-member body of the Shura Council. Also in 2011, the King opened the new campus of Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman

University, making it the largest women's university in the world. The campus can host up to 50 000 students and has over 15 departments.¹¹ Although the number of educated women may be growing exponentially, employment is not. According to the International Labour Organisation, in 2009, 17% of women in Saudi Arabia were employed, compared to higher employment rates in other Gulf States.¹² The issue of Saudi women's employment is multi-faceted, as it involves negotiation with Islamic laws, including those restricting a woman's movements. Gendered segregation remains a contentious issue, especially when promoting women's increased participation in social, economic and political realms. As articulated by Amélie Le Renard in her analysis entitled *Only for Women: Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia*, reforms aimed at women's increased educational, political and social participation must occur within spatial limitations. Thus, although the laws restricting the mingling of genders are upheld, the number of 'women only' centers has increased, creating diverse areas where women may choose to seek employment.¹³

⁸ Sakr, "Women and Media in Saudi Arabia."

⁹ Sakr, « "Women and Media in Saudi Arabia."

¹⁰ Middle East Policy Council, "A Step Forward for Women in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East in Focus*, 2014, <http://www.mepc.org/articles-commentary/commentary/step-forward-women-saudi-arabia?print>

¹¹ Mustapha Ajbaili, "Saudi Arabia opens largest women's university in the world," *Al Arabiya News*, May 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/05/15/149218.html>

¹² Katy Watson, "Saudi women turn to social media for the right to drive," *BBC News*, June 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-13928215>

Saudi Women Activists

However, new opportunities for women may be to no avail as Saudi women continue to be restricted by male guardianship, as previously mentioned. Although women have a growing number of avenues in which to participate in Saudi life, they may find their opportunities restrained if their father, husband or other close male relative disagrees with their plans. They may be permitted to attend school and pursue a degree but may find themselves unable to seek employment, both within and outside the country, due to their guardian's wishes. Until recently, women did not have personal identification cards, having to rely on a male relative's authority to identify them. Recently, the Council of Ministers has required that all Saudi women get their own identification card, a move seen by most as empowering women's independence from their male relatives.¹⁴ Further, when faced with extreme cases of violence at the hands of their guardians, some women have taken the matter to the courts. Perhaps the most well-known case is that of Samar Badawi who, after years of physical and verbal abuse at the hands of her father, sued him in order to gain freedom from his guardianship. She was later sued by her father, on grounds of 'disobedience', until he found a judge who would incarcerate her. She was later released and her guardianship was granted to her uncle.¹⁵ Badawi has subsequently become a leading voice in women's empowerment and has spearheaded many movements, including challenging guardianship, and demanding the right to vote and drive.

Others continue to courageously speak out against the abuse plaguing Saudi women. Hala al-Dosari, a Saudi women's rights activist, runs the website Saudi Women Rights where she speaks against domestic abuse. She provides women with basic information about their rights

and information about what to do in cases of domestic violence. Indeed, the Saudi patriarchal system has enabled the marginalization and systematic abuse of women. Domestic abuse remained largely publicly unchallenged until recently. In August of 2013, the Saudi cabinet passed the "Protection From Abuse" law, launching a powerful ad campaign featuring a veiled woman with one black eye and a caption reading "Some things can't be covered fighting women's abuse together."¹⁶ Combined with the new I.D. cards, this is another step towards women's empowerment and protection as they are now encouraged to report domestic abuse and may do so without the presence of a guardian.

Further, the role played by mass media in female empowerment amongst Saudi women is instrumental. As mentioned, the media has brought forth women's issues and often, even women's voices. According to the Arab Social Media Report compiled in 2011, a high percentage of Saudi Arabian respondents, both men and women, felt that

social media could be an empowering tool for women, enhancing their participation in several facets of their lives, including the legal (by promoting women's rights), economic (enhancing entrepreneurial and employ-

¹³ Amélie Le Renard, "Only for Women: Women, the State and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal*, 62: 4 (2008):

¹⁴ Jassim Abuzaid, "IDs a Must for Saudi Women," *Arab News*, 26 March 2013, <http://www.arabnews.com/news/446108>

¹⁵ Karima Idrissi and Jannie Schipper, "Saudi Activists Honoured As Woman of Courage," *Radio Netherlands Worldwide*, March 2012, <http://www.rnw.nl/english/article/saudi-activist-honoured-woman-courage>

¹⁶ Aljezeera, "Saudi Arabia Outlaws Domestic Violence," August, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middle-ast/2013/08/20138290272119559.html>

ment opportunities), political (increased political participation), and social (through self-expression and promoting social change) aspects.¹⁷

Through social media, Saudi women and men are able to participate in discussions regarding women's issues. Recently, the Women2Drive initiative has spurred international attention, acquiring mass support. Initiated by a few Saudi women activists, including Hala al-Dosari, the Women2Drive movement circulated through Twitter and Facebook pictures of women behind the wheel, criticising the ban on driving. Interestingly, the ban on women's driving stems from fatwas and other Islamic law, and not the Quran. Activists argue that the restriction is a barrier for women, not only to go about regular business, but also for business owners. Women may also find their movements restricted as paying a driver is a costly expenditure for most.

However, the Saudi government responded negatively to the initiative, pressuring activists to cease and even incarcerating others. The Women2Drive initiative points to the inherent problem of activism, as it often criticises the government and its leaders. The government may respond with prosecution or resistance to social activism as it may lead to social disturbance in the Kingdom. Activists are essentially breaking laws connected to the disturbance of public peace and sedition. As expressed by Salman al-Dosary, a pro-Saudi Arabian government commentator and editor in chief of the Saudi newspaper *al-Eqtisadiyah*, "women will drive, just without provocation."¹⁸ Hence, opinion is mixed on bottom-up reform and activism. On the one hand, women were granted the right to vote following the demands of a few women activists and elites. On the other hand, the Kingdom will not tolerate any

direct criticism of its policies and laws. Hence, women's activism, like "grass-roots" activism altogether, is a rather contentious issue within Saudi Arabia.

Finally, as demonstrated, there have been a number of reforms in Saudi Arabia specifically targeted to women's issues. However, change must take place within the limitations of a regulated Islamic system. Further, change is gradual and can often seem stagnant, which is to be expected in any conservative system where the fear of a misogynist backlash is ever-present. Bottom-up activism is generally ill-received by the country's leadership, adding to women activists' frustrations. Further, Saudi women's bodies present opportunities for both reform and persistence of culture; the modernization of the Saudi nation often involves reforms affecting women's bodies, status and space. However, conservative voices remain adamant about preserving Islamic culture and tradition, reflected in the Saudi woman. As King Abdullah began to lead the nation to modernization, the site is ripe with possibilities. However, with the appointment of King Salman bin Abdulaziz in January 2015, it remains to be seen how women's activism and reforms will take shape. Although the battle for Saudi women's emancipation and liberation remains largely contentious, it is nonetheless an uphill one.

¹⁷ Dubai School of Government, "The Role of Social Media in Arab Women's Empowerment," *Arab Social Media Report*, 1:3 (2011): 9

¹⁸ Aljazeera, "Saudi Arabia Outlaws Domestic Violence."

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