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Women in Saudi Arabia: Moving Forward

Women in Saudi Arabia may be obviously discriminated than men. They do not fully get some of their basic rights. They always feel inferior to men who have the right of guardianship over the females of the family. The main reason of the feeling of segregation may be related to the traditions of the culture they come from, and to the way their older generations raised them. The problem is that throughout generations, some principles got stuck to the society and people believed it is part of the Islamic religion. The huge mistake those people made is that they translated and defined Islamic rules from Quran and Sunnah in a wrong way, and in way that they believed in, regardless what the right meanings were. So after years some cultural aspects and thoughts got mixed up with religious principles and people got used to it, and they would hardly change the way they think about it. Islamic religion has always guaranteed women's rights equally to men, and treated women as an appreciated creature. The west sees women in Saudi Arabia as oppressed human beings who have a lack of the simplest rights that express their freedom. Having male guardians who decide for them what to do, wearing the veil that covers their beauty, females not being able to drive inside the country of Saudi; all mentioned before are actions seen by the west as crimes and faces of oppression towards women of Saudi. This paper will demonstrate some of the issues and concerns –both positive and negative sides- of women in Saudi, what have been already done for them, and what changes and improvements can be done in favor of these women.

Education

Education is a human right that both genders should have access to. The first word God sent to his Prophet Mohammed –peace be upon him- was “iqra’a” which means “read”. Many

verses of the Quran and pieces of Hadith urge Muslims to learn and study without emphasizing on education being for a certain gender than the other. The Saudi government has been working on developing and improving the standards of education for women. In 1960, and after seven years from the first school for boys was established, women got involved in the educational plan (Dumato, Posusney 2003, 245). Long time ago, women were expected to be taught restrictedly by females only in the same lecture room in order to maintain religious rules that prohibit women being in a mixed environment with men. With the development of technology, now days, women are taught by males instructors who are not present at the same room, but through televisions that allow them to discuss the materials and feel free to ask whatever questions they have for their professors (Dumato, Posusney 2003, 1). In addition, women had limited majors to study and specialized in years ago, but lately new areas of interest have been opened for them. For instant, they did not have the chance to be in engineering, media or political fields, but things have changed since private and public schools offered new various options for them. For example, Effat University in Jeddah was the first to have Architecture Undergraduate program for women (Effat University). Women are now getting high degrees in Chemistry, Humanities, Law and Medicine as well as many different areas of study.

In 2005, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia created a Scholarship Program called “King Abdullah Scholarship Program”. The program is sponsored by the Ministry of Higher Education and was planned to last for five years, and in 2010 the King ordered that the program continues for more additional five years (Ministry of Higher Education 2010). This program send Saudi students to study abroad in many countries, for example, United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries. The program is designed for both men and women to obtain higher degrees from prestigious universities abroad. As any other

program, in order to be accepted in the scholarship the applicant should meet some terms and conditions. One of those conditions mentioned in the website of the Ministry of Higher Education and which is against women's will is "A female applicant must have a legally acceptable male companion, who will be required to travel with her and remain with her until the completion of her scholarship study". This condition is depressing for women who have no male relatives that can accompany them in their educational trip. Basmah is a Saudi woman who finished her masters in Saudi and graduated with a very high GPA. She was the first on her class and her dream was to gain a PHD degree in one of the good universities abroad. Her only "fault" in life is that she has no brothers, no sons, and her father is an old man who cannot travel with her. She was interviewed on a Saudi program called "Ya Hala" that was aired on Rotana TV channel, and tried to explain her situation so maybe someone can help her and help the other ones out there who have similar situations to Basmah. Islam is never harsh on women, but it is people who put rules and act as knowing what is best for these women without giving them the chance to express their opinion in an issue that matters for them.

Male Guardianship

Since the first day of any woman's life, male guardianship is given to her father if he is alive, and if he is not it is giving to her brother, uncle or any of her male relatives (Al Nafjan 2011). Male guardian acts like a mediator for women when she needs to do any interaction with the government. The guardian take important decisions in women's lives that she should have the choice do decide on. If a man proposed to marry a woman and her guardian thought he is the good one for her, she should be convinced by her guardian's decision since he knows what is the best for her, regardless what qualifies a man from her perspective. Male guardian confirmation is needed in issues like marriage, divorce, education, work and even travelling. Any women in

Saudi can never travel alone without her guardian's accompany, unless her guardian gives her a written and legal permission that states that he does not mind her travelling alone. Women can work and it is not prohibited for her, but she has to get the permission from her guardian, and if he asks her to stop working she should listen to him and obey (PBS.org 2011).

This is not the situation in all Saudi families, but in this extremely conservative society most families do it this way. The situation gets harder when someone like Rawdah Al-Yousif comes up and expresses her satisfaction and happiness of having a male guardian by starting a campaign called "My Guardian Knows What's Best For Me". This campaign's goal is to "strengthen the guardianship system" by collecting signatures of supporters in order to urge the King of Saudi not to pay attention to local and international activists and organizations that call for change in the guardianship system (Al Nafjan 2011). Such campaigns hinder the progress of people who are working and trying to change women's situations in the country.

Wearing Veil and Driving

When the west talks about women and their rights in Saudi Arabia, they immediately discuss wearing veils and driving issues. In her article "Voices from Behind the Veil", Nicole Gaouette reports her interview with a Saudi lady called Heba Attieh. When first giving a background about her, Nicole gives a picture of a Saudi women who is wearing her veil, and who got married at the age of seventeen, cant leave the house by herself, cant drive, and cant travel without her husband's permission (2001). Restating it again, she mentions that Heba is a doctor in King Faisal Specialist Hospital in Jeddah. She has a PHD in speech pathology and do other community work besides her job. She mentions how women behind the veil like Heba are success in education and work, and how they have normal lives after work times and when they gather with their families and friends. Saudi women see their situation from a perspective

different than the perspective of westerners. The west see the veil as a sign of obvious oppression not considering that women who wear veil are people who got used to something and see it normal because it is something from their tradition or because their religious faith is a bit high. Seeing women walking in the streets of Saudi Arabia wearing veil as a weird covered creature walking down there is just similar to how those covered women see westerners as if they were wearing nothing when they walk out in the streets not covered with a veil. It is how the culture is based on values, beliefs and traditions that they got used to and see it from a perspective that they can understand but the other culture can't.

Women in Saudi Arabia are the only in the world who don't drive. They have been dreaming of the day things changes and they get the chance to experience being independent and driving to work and to any place they want. In every gathering I attend, girls talk about the driving topic. It is not that they feel oppressed, but they feel that driving and being independent is a way of feeling free. But others think that having a driver is much better, like Baeshen who states in Nicole's article "I do all my phone calls, set up appointments and I don't have to worry about parking" (2001).

In 2011, Manal Al sharif a thirty-two years old Saudi woman from the eastern region. She works in the IT department in Saudi Aramco, the Saudi national oil company. She started a campaign -on social network websites- that calls for giving women the right to drive, and plans for women to start driving by June 17, 2011 (Shubert 2011). Her campaign was not the first one in Saudi; there was a previous one in the 90s. Since women don't drive in Saudi, Manal taught many of them how to drive. When she started to apply the plan of the campaign she was stopped by the police for driving a car in the streets of Khobar, although there is no law that bans women from driving in Saudi. Hundreds of women followed her on her Facebook and Twitter pages, and

supported her in her campaign. Also, a significant number of men followed her and supported her cause. Later, the media was writing all about Manal and her campaign, and interviews of her started to interest people who were seeing her as the women that will make change in the country. Turki Aldakhil, a known Saudi journalist, on his interview show that called “Eda’at” or “Spotlights” that is aired on Al Arabiya News Channel, hosted Manal. In the interview, she talked about her experience with the police and the sheikhs after starting the campaign when she was stopped. She also discussed and reviewed her findings in regards to the laws and regulations of women driving in Saudi. She and one of her fellows –Bahiya Al mansour- who is majoring in Islamic Studies in Faisal’s University, made a study researching for officials’ statements to aware the society with the real regulations out there. She said they found no statements that ban women’s driving in the country, but those officials refer to it as a cultural issue other than a legal one. So the rejection comes from the society –manly men of the society- but not from the leaders, so whenever people of the society accept the idea and get convinced with the necessity of driving for some women, the leaders will take a second look on the case. She transfers to talk about the case from the Islamic religious perspective, and she also found nothing that states driving as banned or “Haram” action. Religious people’s fatwa agreed that the origin is the permissibility. She states that sheikh Ahmed Ibn Baz said: “woman’s driving is a right but not a priority” and said “it is from the basic rights of freedom that is not acquired, and it is originally permitted”. Additionally, the Saudi Traffic, which is part of the Ministry of Interior and that, has all the regulations and laws related to the case. She refers to the general director of the traffic department Major Gen Fahd al Bishr who confirmed that according to the new law of traffic that is being followed today in Saudi there is no legal text that ban women from driving a vehicle. So all the findings prove that there are no clear laws that ban women driving, and no religious

versus from Quran or Hadith deprive women from driving in Saudi, but the whole issue is referred to as cultural issue that the society does not agree with.

Early Marriages

Saudi Arabia has a diversity of families and tribes who come from totally different backgrounds. It is common among some people that they agree to marry their young daughters to men who are decades older than them. Some people are raised on these traditions but others take it very seriously as child abuse. In 2011, people of Saudi got shocked when Sheikh Saleh Al Fawzan, who is a very important cleric in the country, issued fatwa that allows fathers to marry off their daughters to old men even if those young girls “are in cradle” (Mcdowall, Said 2011). This fatwa came out by Al Fawzan right after the Justice Ministry said it would regulate very early marriages. The media agitated after Al Fawzan posted this fatwa on his website. His claim was that it is not acceptable for people to change the rules of God, and that Prophet Mohammad got married to Aisha when she was six and didn’t have sex with her until she turned nine, which is the age of puberty. His claim does not make sense to lots of people, because how would he compare people to the Prophet while there is a huge gap between the time of the Prophet and the time we are living in now. The Justice Ministry wanted to legislate the age of marriage because of the problems of abuse turned to them from couples that are from different generations. Even back with years and before this fatwa came out, many people campaigned to defend women’s right of stopping early marriages for both young girls and boys. They tried to deliver a message to the government to set certain rules and ages for a couple to get married. “A recent campaign by Sayidty Magazine explicitly condemned child marriages and was supported by members of the Saudi royal family, ministers, writers, artists, actors and even entire hospital administrations” (Al Nafjan 2010). Such campaigns can be effective if only the government made a response by

setting the minimum age for men and women to get marry. It makes sense if the age range was at least seventeen for women and eighteen for men to be eligible to get married. At such an age the couple can start planning for their lives, and handle responsibilities for the family they are building. Some sheikhs do not support early marriages but they have no choice when they marry young couples because there is no rule set by law that restricts the age of couples getting married. In all issues there are obvious conflicts between what is religious and what is just known as tradition.

Women in Shura

King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz started his “reformist stance” after he became the leader of Saudi in 2005 (Murphy 2011). His plans included women’s rights, since he is known for his support for woman of the country. In September 25, 2011, the country witnessed the most significant change the king made regarding women in Saudi. He announced that women would officially have the right to participate and vote in the municipal elections, and also to be nominated for membership as a consultative in the Shura Council (Human Rights Watch 2011). As listed in shura.gov.sa, Shura Council was founded in 1924 in the time of King Abdulaziz after he arrived to Makkah. Since that long time, Shura had only male members and absolutely no women had the right to vote in the elections or nominate themselves as members in the “Majlis”. No women were ever members in Shura throughout the past seventy-three years. The title of Murphy’s article the “First Step for Saudi Women’s Rights”, inspires female readers and encourages them to take the step and start to look forward to gain their lost rights. It is worth mentioning that women have male supporters who are or were members of the Shura Council, such as, Mohammad al-Zulfa and Osama al-Kurdi who said they were “happy” and “excited” about this announcement and the change happening in Saudi women’s rights as mentioned in

Murphy's. When the king announced the news in his speech, he made clear statements that suppress the reaction of agitated people –especially religious ones- who would reject his new ruling. He reminded them of women's status in the time of Prophet Mohammad and how he respected their thoughts and opinions, and the king stressed as well on him taking this decision because women in his country should never be marginalized and they should prove themselves as qualified members in the Shura Council (Murphy 2011). This decision is a turning point for women's lives in Saudi Arabia, and it will help them to acquire whatever lost rights they looked forward to get decades ago but in the right time and all by their efforts.

Some Significant Names of Women in Saudi

It is true that women's situation in Saudi is poor, and lots of their rights are robbed, but there are some active women who are fighting to get over the obstacles. Today women held different positions in the society and proved their success and proficiency; they even outperformed men in the same domain. Although the number of women playing a vital role in the area is small, but it is growing rapidly and its impact is expanding. Norah al-Faiz is the new and very first Saudi Deputy Minister of Women's Education who was named by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world (Cheney 2009). It is not an easy mission for her to be in such a position, but this signals for change to come in the country. Lubna Olayan, "one of the top business leaders in Saudi" (Al Saud 2005), is another well-known figure in the country. She is one of the most active businesswomen, and was listed also by Time magazine as one of the top 100 most influential people of 2005. She is the first woman to be elected to the board of the Saudi Hollandi Bank as mentioned in the magazine. Dr. Hayat Sindi, who most people of the country recognized her name and accomplishments, is one of the most successful women in Saudi. She studied in Cambridge University and got her PhD from there (dfa.org).

According to her biography on dfa.org, she is a “Visiting Scholar” in “the Department of Chemistry and Chemical Biology” in Harvard University. Her goal is to work on developing and improving health care via technology. She became one of the important role models for young ladies in Saudi Arabia. Lama Al-Sulaiman became known as a “Young Arab Leader” after she was elected for the board of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, a prestigious position that was always taken by men other than women (wisemuslimwomen.org). Last but not least, HRH Princess Ameerah Al Taweel -wife of Prince Al-waleed bin Talal Al Saud- a lady who believes in the power of the youth, and encourages young women -through her speeches in interviews- to prove them selves in the society. She won the Humanitarian Award in the Arabian Business Achievement Awards in 2010. All these previously mentioned names are just few of many names of successful Muslim women who are trying to improve women’s situation in Saudi Arabia.

In few words, segregation and discrimination of women is presented in the Saudi society. With the help of men who believe in the importance of female’s role in the country, women are working on correcting the interpretation of Muslim women by the west. Many female figures are getting known by the world and hopefully more to come. It is not easy to get back rights that have been lost through decades, but it worth a lot to fix the image of Muslim and Saudi women for all people who do not know about their existence.

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