

## **GENDER ROLES IN SAUDI ARABIAN SOCIETY AND POLITICS**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*THIS ARTICLE TRIES TO UNDERSCORE THE IMPORTANT ROLE THAT GENDER EQUALITY OR INEQUALITY HAS IN SHAPING SOCIAL ORDER, INTERNAL AFFAIRS, FOREIGN POLICY AND ECONOMICS. IT DOES THIS BY STUDYING HOW GENDER EQUALITY IS PERCEIVED AND APPLIED IN SAUDI ARABIA – A KEY MIDDLE EAST ACTOR AND A MUSLIM STATE. WE WILL SEE HOW GENDER GAP IS OFTEN DEFINED BY A SET OF FACTORS SUCH AS RELIGION, ECONOMICS, HISTORIC CONTEXT OR EVEN FOREIGN POLICY. IN SOME CASES, GENDER INEQUALITY IS FORMALIZED BY LAW, AS IS THE CASE OF SAUDI ARABIA. BASED ON STATISTICS AND EXAMPLES WE WILL SHOW THE PROPORTIONATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER EQUALITY AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, ECONOMIC GROWTH OR SOCIAL ORDER AND HOW THE SOCIAL FABRIC AND PERFORMANCE OF A STATE IS INFLUENCED BY HOW IT TREATS ITS FEMALE POPULATION. SAUDI ARABIA HAS ITS SHARE OF WOMEN ACTIVISTS, NOTABLY MANAL AL-SHARIF, THAT MAKE A STRONG ARGUMENT FOR GENDER EQUALITY.*

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**KEY WORDS:** GENDER EQUALITY, GENDER GAP, SAUDI ARABIA, HUMAN RIGHTS, RELIGION.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Analyses regarding gender equality have been developing in the public discourse and in the international academic environment together with the development of feminism, a paradigm that took over political science as an extension of realism through rethinking concepts like power and security. Man, in the feminist view on power, doesn't need to control the person next to him, but he must cooperate with him, while, at a political, social and economical level, the role of women was, is and will be tremendous. Critical theory or marxist, liberal, constructivist and postmodern, are the most important variants of this paradigm, through which gender equality has been analyzed.

The Muslim world, rich through his history and its culture, represented one of the most important subjects in these studies, being marked by an immense diversity of gender equality at state level, where, from one extreme to the other, we see societies where Western-style make-up and clothes are real industries or states where Sharia substitutes the Constitution.

In this second category, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the central point of interest, being branded as the most conservative Muslim state, while polygamy, the obligation to wear *burka*, the mandatory accompanying of women in public by men or the denial of the right to drive are constant in the social life of women.

Of course, in order to understand Saudi social reality we must not exclude history and the role the Kingdom is playing in the midst of the Muslim world, the Saudi king being the Guardian of the two Sacred Mosques: Mecca and Medina. Although through wahabbist doctrine, the Kingdom justifies

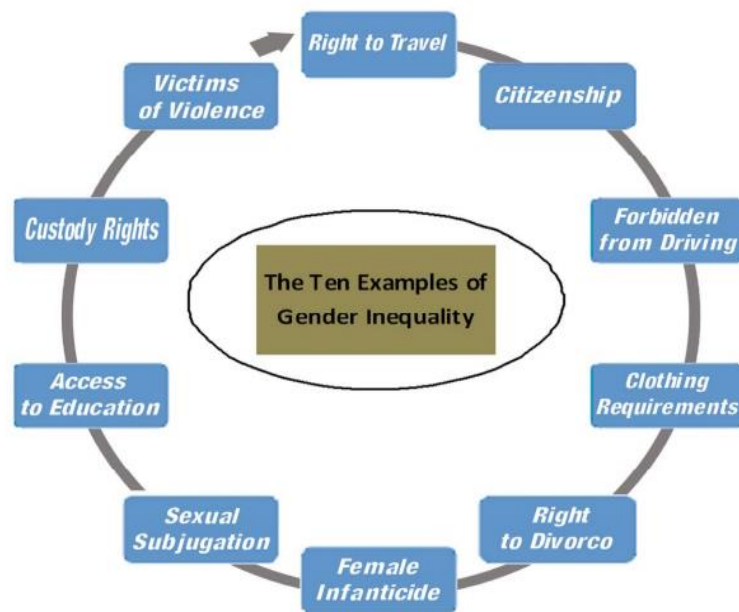
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its existence by tearing itself from the age of ignorance – *jalahilia*, international reports place Saudi Arabia as a state where women’s rights are most abridged.

Within the Arab world, according to a survey taken by Thomson Foundation, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq and Yemen are the countries where the living standard for women is the lowest, whereas at the opposite pole states like Oman, Kuwait, Qatar or Jordan offer better living standards for women.<sup>2</sup> The Saudis are a paradox because their position in this survey is due to gender discrimination, including free movement and the right of women to own property. Even so, the Kingdom is much better positioned than other states with regards to gender violence or the access of women to education and health.<sup>3</sup>

Examples of gender inequality<sup>4</sup>



All of this proves that social progress that started as a consequence of economic development, will give birth, step by step to pressure that will modify in a gradual fashion the entire social paradigm. Thus, just a few years ago women obtained the right to take part in the Shura Council, dominated still by a male majority. At the same time, Bayan Al Zahran is the first woman in the Kingdom’s history to obtain the right to work as a lawyer and her statements showed faith in progress: “*The license is one of our rights and we did not get it until the systemic conditions were applied as set in Article 3 of the legal system. As we all know our father and biggest supporter King Abdullah is the one who proved us right and lightened our way to the future to serve our beloved country. This license enables us to be recognized in the registrar of practicing lawyers*”, said Al Zahran.<sup>5</sup>

A similar message came from Somayya Jabarti, who spoke of the importance of women in Saudi society, immediately after she became the first chief-editor of a newspaper in Saudi Arabia. “*The fact that I am the first woman in Saudi Arabia that holds such a position, creates a double responsibility for me, and many of the decisions I will make will reflect on the other Saudi women. My success will*

<sup>2</sup> Egypt 'worst for women' out of 22 countries in Arab world, BBC, November 12, 2013, available on <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24908109>, accessed at 12<sup>th</sup> May 2015

<sup>3</sup> Egypt 'worst for women' out of 22 countries in Arab world

<sup>4</sup> Shakir Ahmed Alsaleh, *Gender Inequality in Saudi Arabia: Myth and Reality*, available on <http://www.ipedr.com/vol39/025-ICITE2012-K00003.pdf> accessed at 12<sup>th</sup> May 2015

<sup>5</sup> Saudi Arabia grants license to first female lawyer, English Al Arabiya, October 7, 2013

*not be complete until other Saudi women will be able to achieve similar positions*“, said Somayya after taking over the leading position at the Saudi Gazette.<sup>6</sup>

## WOMENOMICS

Womenomics is a term generally referring to the role women have in shaping the global economy or specific economic sectors. The role women play in the economy is itself shaped by social, cultural and religious factors that intertwine and form a mechanism in which women function. This mechanism varies in its leniency towards what women can or cannot do, depending on the region or state we are referring to.

Womenomics also refers to two key economic aspects: an ever growing trend of capital and resources recirculation from men to women and the increased penetration of women on the labor market. Even though gender equality is seen differently by different cultures and religions, the economic vista on this topic tends to be universal, in the sense that higher levels of gender equality delivers several fundamental benefits such as poverty reduction and significant increase in the welfare of children. When scaling the macroeconomic level to a global level, is hard not to take note of the simple and basic fact that a little over half of the total population is made up of women, thus having a dramatic impact on economic performance.

According to an IMF report, *Women, Work, and the Economy: Macroeconomic Gains from Gender Equity*<sup>7</sup>, there are several proved key implications of enhancing or degrading gender equality within the labor market, implications that reverberate onwards in the economy: the rise of the female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) to levels similar to that of males would have an impact of +5% of the GDP in the United States, +9% in Japan, +12% in the United Arab Emirates and an astonishing +34% for Egypt; women tend to invest higher percentages of their income into education which in turn gives them an edge in the labor market; companies that have women in decision-making bodies tend to make them less prone to high risk financial decisions in comparison to male dominated boards of management. According to the same IMF report, the facts regarding women in the labor force are heterogeneous across global regions and tend to be rather worrisome than optimistic: the average global female labor participation rate is about 50%, but varies greatly depending on the region. The lowest rate is seen in the MENA regions with 21% while East-Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa experiences 63%. Upon achieving a greater role in the economy and starting to acquire more capital, women tend to lead more and be involved in politics.

A Pew Research Center study on *Women and Leadership*<sup>8</sup> in the United States of America taken on 1,835 randomly selected adults conducted online Nov. 12-21, 2014, reveals some interesting facts. In the most advanced economy in the world, approximately four in ten Americans think that the American public is just not ready to elect/promote women in top political or corporate positions. In fact about 55% of the women questioned believe that in the future, men will continue to monopolize top positions in politics and private companies. About 19% of the members of Congress are women and the percentage for CEOs of Fortune 500 companies is at 5%, with only 26 women leading top business across the US. A positive trend is the fact that in America, young women are outpacing young men in college subscription and completion as seen in fig. 2. which probably will define the role of women in the next century and how a next American generation works.

But the overall picture is not that optimistic or drastically changed, neither in America, or in the rest of the world, compared to two decades ago, when the Declaration on Women's Rights was signed in Beijing, the biggest gathering of this kind. In fact, ILO Director-General Guy Ryder said:

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<sup>6</sup> For more details, please read Răzvan Munteanu, *Somayya Jabarti: Un pas mic pentru omenire, un pas mare pentru Arabia*, Adevărul.ro, 2 martie 2014, available at [http://adevarul.ro/international/in-lume/somayyajabarti-pas-mic-pentruomenire-pas-mare-arabia-1\\_531336f3c7b855ff56ccc61b/index.html](http://adevarul.ro/international/in-lume/somayyajabarti-pas-mic-pentruomenire-pas-mare-arabia-1_531336f3c7b855ff56ccc61b/index.html), accessed at 13<sup>th</sup> May 2015

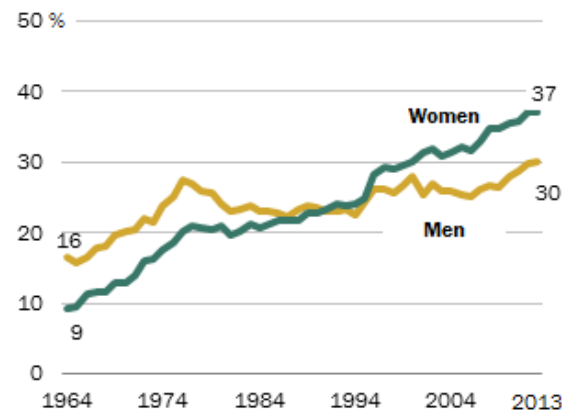
<sup>7</sup> KatrinElborgh-Woytek, Monique Newiak, Kalpana Kochhar, Stefania Fabrizio, Kangni Kpodar, Philippe Wingender, Benedict Clements, Gerd Schwartz, *Women, Work, and the Economy: Macroeconomic Gains from Gender Equity*, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2013/sdn1310.pdf> accessed at 13<sup>th</sup> May 2015

<sup>8</sup> *Women and Leadership Public Says Women are Equally Qualified, but Barriers Persist*, Pew Researcher Center, January 14, 2015, available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/women-and-leadership/>

“Are working women better off today than they were 20 years ago? The answer is a qualified yes. Has this progress met our expectations? The answer is decidedly no”. Shauna Olney, Chief of the Gender, Equality and Diversity Branch of ILO said that “the overriding conclusion 20 years on from Beijing is that despite marginal progress, we have years, even decades to go until women enjoy the same rights and benefits as men at work.”<sup>9</sup> Efforts are being made around the world to promote women in the economy and society, first and foremost in respect of their fundamental rights as human beings and because by doing so, it has a profoundly positive effect on the economy and on the social fabric. The European Union has in place the *Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015*<sup>10</sup> and world leaders have reiterated a clear goal in their 2014 Brisbane statement, article 9, to reduce the gap in participation rates between men and women by 25% by 2025, meaning to introduce in the labor market approximately 100 million women.<sup>11</sup>

### Young Women Outpacing Young Men in College Completion

% of adults ages 25 to 29 with at least a bachelor's degree



Note: Based on adults ages 25 to 29. Prior to 1992, those with at least a bachelor's degree refers to those with four or more years of college.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the March Current Population Survey, Integrated Public Use Micro Series (IPUMS)

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Be it the economic argument, the fundamental human rights argument or both, women are slowly gaining ground in gender role within our society, which can only benefit us as a whole. Discrimination against women is harmful, unfair but most of all is unsubstantiated and devoid of reasonable arguments.

### GENDER ROLES IN SAUDI ARABIA

Gender roles in Saudi Arabia are deeply influenced by religion. Saudi Arabia is a Muslim state which means it looks to Sharia (Islamic law), specifically Salafism, a particular strain of Sunni Islam, in order to determine benchmarks to measure against social norms. This *status quo* has a lot of implication on women. First of all, Saudi Arabia, as well as most Gulf Monarchies, is a patriarchal society, which means men have the leading role, provide the workforce that propels the economy and

<sup>9</sup>ILO: *Progress on gender equality at work remains inadequate*, available at [http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_348035/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_348035/lang--en/index.htm) accessed at 14th May 2015

<sup>10</sup> *Strategy for equality between women and men 2010-2015*, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/strategy\\_equality\\_women\\_men\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/strategy_equality_women_men_en.pdf) accessed at 14th May 2015

<sup>11</sup> *G20 Leaders' Communiqué Brisbane Summit*, 15-16 November 2014, available at [https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/brisbane\\_g20\\_leaders\\_summit\\_communique1.pdf](https://g20.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/brisbane_g20_leaders_summit_communique1.pdf) accessed at 14th May 2015

are tasked with providing for women. Also central to Arabian culture is the concept of *namus*, roughly translated to *honour* which is of key importance for men. *Namus* influenced, amongst others, by women's behavior in society, thus incentivizing men to enforce a strict code of conduct in order to preserve this concept.

Saudi Arabia has gone a long way in recent years in term of reducing the gender gap but still has a lot of issues regarding gender roles, issues that ultimately undermine the Kingdom's status and political stability, thus endangering its regional and global role. Let's have a brief look at some data made available in the World Gender Gap Report 2014, report made available by the World Economic Forum.<sup>12</sup> Currently Saudi Arabia is ranked 130<sup>th</sup> from 142 countries with a 0.606 score (where 1 means equality and 0 means inequality). Female unemployment rate is at 18.6% while male unemployment rate is 3.2% which is a big gap. The percentage of women that have an account at an official financial institution is 15% while men stand at 73%. The gap is smaller with regards to PhD degrees with women achieving a 45% rate while men reach 55%. In the Rights and Norms category, Saudi Arabia has 1.0 in the indicator *Inheritance rights of daughters*, 0.5 for *Women's access to land ownership* and 0.0 for *Women's access to credit* (1 is the worst score and 0 the best score). This figures show that women have different challenges and benefits while living in Saudi Arabia.

With regards to religion as a key factor in shaping gender roles in Saudi society, it is not necessarily a given fact that it dictates a discriminatory or negative behavior towards women. In fact, there are many references in the Quran to strong female role models that lead and have powerful statements to make. The gender gap is also a consequence of the nomadic and tribal culture that underpins Arabian history.

Another extensive report that can shed a clearer light on gender roles in Saudi Arabia is OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)<sup>13</sup>. SIGI is a complex instrument which details discrimination against women per country and region taking into account multiple variables, with five main dimensions: discriminatory family code, restricted physical integrity, son bias, restricted resources and assets, and restricted civil liberties. The family code section details legislative data that is very relevant. For instance, article 8 requires that the government be premised on equality in accordance with Sharia law, but under Sharia law, women are considered to be legal minors, under the control of their *mahram* which is a person with whom the female is related to and is not able to marry him; men are allowed to divorce in an unilaterally fashion while women can only do so in very specific circumstances; women general inherit less than men and are overlooked when inheritance capital is distributed because are considered to be dependent on their fathers or husbands; there is no legally defined minimum age for marriage and it is a subject which has the approval and backing of religious leaders.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding domestic violence, a law criminalizing domestic abuse was passed only in 2013 but the effectiveness of this law is questionable, taking into account the fact that this subject is rarely brought to surface due to social taboo and norms. In the *son bias* section, the report draws attention on a gap between the male/female ration of individuals aged 15-64 which is 1.29 and the same ratio at birth, which is 1.05. This gap means there are missing women who create this gap due to intra-household income being diverted to sons rather than daughters.

Recent years have seen an improvement in Saudi Arabia's drive to create the tools necessary for women to expand their role in society. Legislation that required women to hire a male manager was abolished 2005.

The report gives a grim view on the freedom of movement of women in Saudi Arabia, which is severely restricted by the fact that in almost all cases women need the permission of their *mahram* order to move outside the premises of their own household. In fact, for movement outside and inside the country, they need the written approval of their guardian.

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<sup>12</sup> *World Gender Gap Report Country Profiles Saudi Arabia*, available at <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/economies/#economy=SAU> accessed at 14th May 2015

<sup>13</sup> Saudi Arabia Country Profile, Gender Index, available at <http://genderindex.org/country/saudi-arabia> accessed at 15th May 2015

<sup>14</sup> *No minimum age for marriage of girls – Grand Mufti*, ArabianBusiness, December 22, 2014, available on <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/no-minimum-age-for-marriage-of-girls-grand-mufti-576044.html> accessed at 15th May 2015

## STUDY CASE: MANAL AL-SHARIF

Manal al-Sharif is a women's activist from Saudi Arabia that portrays the struggle of women in Saudi Arabia in order to achieve a more gender equal society. She became an important name for human rights on the global stage after her 2011 campaign called *Women2Drive* for the removal of driving ban legislation for women. In order to attract attention, she intentionally got in a car and drove while Wajeha al-Huwaider, another famous women activist from Saudi Arabia, filmed her. This led to her arrest for nine days. She was influenced by the events of the Arab Spring and also by the power of social tools like Twitter or Facebook, which became a stage on which she could air her opinions on gender equality.

Her role evolved from just asking the right to drive for women, to being the voice of change for women in Saudi Arabia. In her opinion, "*a Saudi woman can't make any decision in her life—study, work, marry, obtain a passport, and travel—without written permission from her legal male guardian, effectively treating her as a minor all her life,*" she says. "*For the religious establishment, this is like their last castle, so if they lose this castle, they lose their grip on women, on controlling women. For us, the status quo of women in Saudi Arabia—being controlled, being minors, being second-class citizens—is the key to change.*" She received great recognition from the Western world for her work and she was selected as one of 2012's Time magazine's "100 Most Influential People in the World" and awarded the Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent at the Oslo Freedom Forum while Foreign Policy magazine named al-Sharif one of the Top 100 Global Thinkers of 2011. While the fundamental basis of her speech is made up of human rights, the changes that she proposes to Saudi society could have far-reaching economic consequences. For example, her push for women be allowed to drive a car could mean a dramatic boost to the auto industry. More rights, access and freedom of movement could trigger growth in basically all sectors, from transportation to financial services. This can be crucial for a fossil-based economy such as Saudi Arabia, which actively searches for ways to invest its petrodollars, into infrastructure and other future growth sectors that will be able to sustain Saudi society once fossil fuels will run out.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the small steps achieved with regards to women rights, Saudi Arabia remains the most conservative state, worldwide, with the religious clergy criticizing every policy of opening up that the King is putting to practice. Even so, dialogue is present and socio-political pressure is rising. Immediately after 9/11, in order to distance itself from extremist violence, Riyadh began to fight against stereotypes in education and issues regarding Saudi Women, by promoting social policies. More so, women started to be part of official delegations.<sup>15</sup> Afterwards, a series of reforms regarding gender equality were put into place by the wish of the Monarchy to stop social tensions that came together with events of the Arab Spring, but this type of "*state sponsored feminism*", by this referring, among others, to examples from the former Soviet Union, or from North Africa, produced only superficial reforms with regards to the role of women in society and politics.<sup>16</sup>

Taking into account extremely complex and difficult geopolitical factors that influence the current regional status quo in the Middle East towards a direction not favorable to Saudi Arabia, it needs an egalitarian and open society, without social tensions, which can back foreign policy in a robust and vigorous manner, thus increasing the chances to keep its leading Muslim status.

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<sup>15</sup> LE RENARD, Amelie, The Politics of "Unveiling Saudi Women": Between Postcolonial Fantasies and the Surveillance State, available at [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20259/the-politics-of-unveiling-saudi-women\\_between-post](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20259/the-politics-of-unveiling-saudi-women_between-post), accessed at 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2015

<sup>16</sup> LE RENARD, Amelie, The Politics of "Unveiling Saudi Women": Between Postcolonial Fantasies and the Surveillance State, available at [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20259/the-politics-of-unveiling-saudi-women\\_between-post](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20259/the-politics-of-unveiling-saudi-women_between-post), accessed at 15<sup>th</sup> of May 2015

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