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Between Tradition and Modernization: the Influence of Social and Cultural Changes on the Position of Woman in Saudi Arabia

Abstract

The Middle East has been constantly changing and developing. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, although being the most restricted country of the region, has not resisted those transformations, either. Regardless of the pace of changes, which are more evolutionary than revolutionary, a progress in social reforms in Saudi Arabia is consistent and visible. The government has acknowledged that admitting women to social and political life of the Kingdom is necessary for the sake of the country. Improving the status of women and granting them more social rights is one of the government's most important and most cautious activities which require reconciliation between the standards of modern statehood and the dogmas and principles of strict (Wahhabian) interpretation of Islam. Nobody, including optimistic liberals, believes that final changes can take less than few generations. However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is capable of becoming alike Qatar, Oman or Bahrain – a modern Islamic country in which both male and female citizens contribute to political and social life.

For the last few decades the government of Saudi Arabia has been intensely searching for a solution to its most urgent problem, i.e. reconciliation between the standards of modern statehood and the dogmas and principles of Islam. The problem becomes particularly complicated when referred to Saudi Arabia, one of the most vividly developing markets in the Middle East, claiming accession to the prestigious international organization such as WTO and at the same time, being the most conservative Islamic country based on Wahhabian Islam. The King of Saudi Arabia – ‘Abd Allāh Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz as-Su‘ūd, following the policy of reforms initiated by his father, has taken up the challenge of leading his country to the reality of the 21st century. The Saudi government is aware

that keeping strong international position of the Kingdom and being an equal partner to the most powerful countries of the present world, requires achieving the status of a democratic state accepted by other countries. This requirement, however, implies the necessity of improving the status of woman in the society and granting her more rights, which is an extremely delicate issue.

Within the compass of the last few decades¹ the “woman issue” and woman’s role in the public life of the society has been often the question of contention between liberal reform-minded royals and religious conservatives. Women remain a largely invisible part of Saudi Arabia’s conservative and strictly segregated society. A mixture of tradition and strict (Wahhabian) interpretation of Islam deprives Saudi females of the rights taken for granted by women in other parts of the world. Saudi Arabian women are forbidden to drive cars, travel without a male guardian, or leave the country without a written permission of husband or father.² They can not get an education or job without the written approval of a relative male guardian and they still do not possess ID cards which are commonly acceptable in the country.³ Saudi women who work (about 5% of them do) are encouraged to enter fields such as nursing and teaching, where they do not mix with males. In college they can not major in engineering, economics or law.⁴ In public, Saudi females are required to wear the *abaya* – a neck-to-ankle long black robe and cover their hair with a black scarf. In restaurants, banks, and other public places women have to enter and exit through special doors.⁵ Inside restaurants, there are male’s, female’s and family’s sections.⁶ The *mutawwa* – religious police, subordinated to the Committee for the Protection of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, headed by a Cabinet minister and founded by the government, patrol shopping centers, restaurants and other public areas to ensure that all the restrictions are abided and that men and women are behaving according to Islamic law. They even visit sport stores and cosmetics shops with felt pens in order to black out pictures of women, displayed on boxes and posters.⁷

All those limitations make women unable to participate in regular social life, where they are still quite often treated as the ‘second class’ human beings, completely dependent on males and left at their mercy. Such situation, which happens to be a common practice in one of the most influential countries of the present world, takes undoubtedly its share in creating the picture of Saudi Arabia as a backward and scullered kingdom with archaic customs, completely unprepared to face the reality of the 21st century. The necessity of changes is understood and declared by King ‘Abd Allāh – the reform-minded ruler – who constantly contends about this matter with the powerful religious establishment.

¹ In 1932 after long lasting tribal fights, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz as-Su‘ūd declared the present state of Saudi Arabia, founded on the religious principles of the Wahhabis.

² Frank Gardner, *Saudi Women Defy Business Curbs*, “BBC News”, January 21, 2001.

³ David Hirst, *Progress as Saudi Women Get ID Cards*, “The Guardian”, October 11, 1999.

⁴ Donna Abu Nasr, *Saudi Women Bound by Tradition*, “The Associated Press”, November 27, 2000.

⁵ Peyman Pejman, *Women Seek Change but Embrace Islamic Traditions*, www.rferl.org

⁶ Nicole Manning, *U.S. Companies Support Tender Segregation in Saudi Arabia*, “National NOW Time”, Summer 2002.

⁷ Donna Abu Nasr, *The Veiled Life of Saudi Women*, “The Associated Press”, December 8, 2000.

Unfortunately, almost every kind of activity taken by the government in order to grant women more social rights meets with harsh resistance of the conservatives. In fact, any change in the existing law and social system disturbs the traditionalists and especially the powerful, often deeply reactionary religious hierarchy. In such a situation clashes between reform-minded royals and religious conservatives seem to be unavoidable. Thus, leading clerics protested vehemently in 1999, when the Crown Prince declared that women were the basic part of the society, whose “active role” no one, was permitted to “undermine or marginalize”.⁸ The protests became even stronger as it became more obvious that the object of such statement were religious conservatives.

Social reforms in the Kingdom, among which improving the status of Saudi women is the most important and the most complicated matter as well, are hard to introduce. Nobody, optimistic liberals included, has belives that changes can take less than few generations. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia being the place of the birth of Prophet Muḥammad and the guardian of the two holy cities, is obviously bound much stronger by religion and tradition than any other Islamic country. Probably that is why the conservatives consider any kind of reforms, innovations or changes as an attack against religion and a dangerous attempt to deprive the Saudis of their Islamic tradition and values. What should be stressed however, is the opinion of prominent scholars and researchers of the Koran, both from Islamic and Western countries, on which most of them agree – Islam does not discriminate women. Or, to be more accurate, it does not discriminate against them more than any other big religions do, as the specialists in religious studies claim. In fact, Islam has never opposed women’s involvement in the political, economic, social or financial spheres of life. On the contrary, it gave them rights they had not had before and accepted them as a part of Muslim society. Unfortunately, Saudi fossilized religious establishment seems to misinterpret or even deny most of the privileges granted to Muslim woman by religion. Protests of conservatives, although claimed to be nothing but resistance to breaking religious laws, in fact have nothing in common with the foundations of Islam. To be true, it is not religion itself that blocks social and cultural reforms in Saudi Arabia but harshly orthodox interpretation of religious laws and deeply rooted tribal tradition. It is enough to mention the name of Ḥadiġa – Prophet Muḥammad’s first wife, and ‘Ā’iṣa – his youngest and most beloved one, to discover, maybe even with a bit of surprise that at the beginning of Islam, which was in 7th century Muslim women had much more freedom and independence than the females in Saudi Arabia today. Protests of Saudi conservatives against women’s involvement in social and political life of the Kingdom are even more incomprehensible in reference with the other Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and neighbouring Qatar, Oman and Bahrain where social changes have been already successfully implemented and do not clash with the principles of Islam.

The highly debatable and controversial issue of lifting the ban on driving for Saudi women seems to be odd in itself. The strong resistance on the part of traditionalists and of the majority of male Saudis in this matter stems, as they claim, from nothing but their

⁸ David Hirst, *op. cit.*

consideration for women, the necessity to protect them against strangers and abide by the rules of long-lasting tradition. In fact, these reasons are hardly conceivable and the motivation of the opponents against lifting the ban unconvincing. First, there are many examples in the Arab history, both from the pre-Islamic era of *Ġahiliyya* and the early Islamic period, that women were riding horses and camels by themselves. What is more, those rides were not an entertainment but had far more serious, though useful character. It was the way for the women of those times to go in the market as well as to go for a war.⁹ Second, considering the matter of safety of the woman and the strict Wahhabian tradition prohibiting woman to stay in the company of males out of her family, it would be more appropriate and logical to hire for her a female chauffeur instead of a male. Unfortunately, the harsh ban on driving for women includes all females in Saudi Arabia, regardless of their nationality, which obviously makes it impossible to employ women as drivers. This kind of policing women imposes a heavy burden on men who by, this way are victimized by their own system. Women's immobility in Saudi Arabia throws the problem of logistics on men. Since women are forbidden to drive men commonly do grocery shopping. They must accompany their wives, sisters, or daughters to the *souqs* or the boutiques.¹⁰ But the restriction leads to far more serious consequences, such as limited access of Saudi women to education and professional work.

Another question of heated discussion between the reform-advocates and traditionalists is the IDs for women.¹¹ When the Interior Ministry announced in November 1999 that preparations were under way to issue ID cards to women (and only to those who asked for them) delegations of conservatives visited Prince 'Abd Allāh to protest. Although it took two years for the Ministry to issue the card, Saudi woman still needs her male guardian's approval to get one.¹² Among the most serious objections of the conservative camp fiercely opposing the ID cards for women is that the bearer's photograph would appear on the document (sic!). The conservatives speculate that unveiled faces of Saudi women could be used in nude photos and circulated as pornography on the internet, which obviously would sully the honor of their family. There were also many brochures and leaflets distributed which informed about dangers of issuing ID's to women. One of the leaflets prepared by conservatives reads: "Whoever gets a card for his women will be acting like a pimp!"¹³ Paradoxically the opponents of women's photo ID cards accept passports for women, which in fact many Saudi females already own.¹⁴ Nonetheless, after two years of preparations new IDs for women were issued in 2001. The introduction of new documents for women is definitely an achievement of the government on the way

⁹ The most famous event of this kind was the 'Camel Fight' with participation of 'Ā'iṣa in 656, after Prophet's death.

¹⁰ Sandra Mackey, *The Saudis – Inside the Desert Kingdom*, New York 2002, p. 131.

¹¹ Women in Saudi Arabia are listed on the identity cards of a male next-of-kin, usually their husband or father.

¹² Donna Abu Nasr, *Women in Saudi Arabia Making Strides in Loosening Rules but They Still Have Far to Go*, "The Associated Press", May 8, 2002.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Moodhy Al-Khalaf, *Saudi Women's ID: Still Just a Piece of Plastic*, "Arab News", July 25, 2003.

to social reform and the beginning of visible changes in women's status in public life. Although the ID cards do not fulfill all expectations of Saudi females, either because of the necessity to obtain written permission of woman's male guardian to get the document or because the cards are not acceptable as a credible document confirming the identity of its owner in most public facilities, it seems obvious that a significant step in Saudi women's battle for independence has been taken. Even though the documents are nowadays worthless, most women believe this will change soon as the door once opened can not be closed again.

The process of transformation which is taking place in the area of Arabian Peninsula is long-lasting and cautious as it must be acceptable for both the reform-minded royals and the conservative representatives of religious establishment and fundamentalists. Probably one of the most visible examples of social and cultural changes in the Kingdom took place during the Jeddah Economic Forum in 2004.¹⁵ That time women caused a political and social storm at the opening ceremony as many of them, with the silent blessing of the government which sponsored the event, appeared wearing dresses instead of *abayas* and without the kerchiefs. Moreover, they dared openly discuss and mingle with men.¹⁶ For the first time Saudi businesswomen participated in the forum in the same room with the men.¹⁷ In effect, media discussed the conference with greater interest as more press reports from the event featured photos of unveiled women participants, which extremely enraged the Saudi religious establishment.¹⁸ As it might have been expected the conference provoked uproar from religious conservatives, who said women had gone too far. The country's highest religious authority – the mufti Šayḥ ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Aš-Šayḥ, issued an edict condemning their behavior, saying women should adhere to modesty in this holy land.¹⁹ Special attention during the conference attracted one of the Saudi businesswomen – Lubnā Bint Sulaymān al-‘Aliyān, whose speech delivered before all participants was shortly called a ‘Saudi women's manifest’. She said: “Without genuine change, it will be impossible to attain any genuine progress. If we want progress in Saudi Arabia, there is no substitute for reform.”²⁰ In response to this statement another female participant of the forum – Nahid Tāhir, an economist working for Al-Ahlī Bank in Saudi Arabia, told the French news agency AFP: “As a Saudi woman, I think we have accomplished a historic deed, thanks to you, Lubna... We women have been isolated within our houses because of discrimination, but today there is the political will to accept us in daily life...

¹⁵ The Jeddah Economic Forum, held January 17–19, 2004, was attended by top Saudi officials and businessmen, as well as international leaders such as Turkish Prime Minister Rəcəp Tayyip Erdoğan, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Ḥariri, former U.S. President Bill Clinton and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed.

¹⁶ Peyman Pejman, *Saudi Women Seek New Place in the Society*, “The Washington Times”, April 21, 2004.

¹⁷ In past forums, women were only allowed to participate in the meetings via closed-circuit television.

¹⁸ The pictures of the bare-faced Saudi women participants were published, i.e. in Saudi daily “‘Ukāz” on January 27, 2004, and in London Arabic-language daily “Al-Quds Al-‘Arabi” on January 21, 2004.

¹⁹ Peyman Pejman, *op. cit.*

²⁰ The Middle East Media Research Institute, *A Recent Debate on Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia*, Special Dispatch Series – No. 670, March 1, 2004.

Constitutional change is necessary to strengthen the role of women [in society], which complements the role of the men".²¹ The participation of Saudi women in Economic Forum side by side with men should be regarded as a great step towards reforms. Although religious authorities condemned both mixing of the sexes at the forum and the media's release of photos of the unveiled Saudi businesswomen, the international observers of the event agree that these protests were surprisingly moderate and restrained. What is more, it seems obvious that the event was the government's demonstration of its liberal policy towards Saudi women and a significant example of its attempts to improve their social position. The Economic Forum in Jeddah confirmed also the commonly known fact that more and more often the ruling royal family turns back on the fossilized religious establishment and approaches liberals and reform supporters.

Probably the earliest most visible example of the "thaw" took place in October 1999 when up to twenty Saudi women attended for the first time in history the Šūrā Council session and followed the proceedings from the balcony overlooking the meeting hall. The head of the Šūrā Council, Muḥammad Ibn Ġubayr agreed on women's visit after long lasting hesitations which, as he explained, stemmed only from his care about special arrangements needed to keep the rule of sex segregation. He also announced that there was no objection in principle to Saudi women attending council meetings and even consulting them on certain issues. "Society and the Šūrā Council must benefit from the qualifications and experience of women" he said. "There is absolutely nothing that prevents the council from being enlightened by the views of women and to consult them and draw on their experience (...), there is also nothing to prevent women from attending council sessions if they abided the customs, tradition and religious teachings." he added.²²

The fact of increasing role of women in the society of Saudi Arabia is unquestionable. Although the changes appear far more slowly than could be wished the effects have already been visible and the prognoses are optimistic. Among the most important aspects of changes there is a growing impact of Saudi women on the economic sphere of the country. About 10% of private businesses in the Kingdom are now thought to be run by women, compared with hardly any a generation ago.²³ At present, there are some 20,000 firms owned by Saudi women – these range from ordinary retail businesses to various types of industry. This figure accounts for some 5% of all registered businesses.²⁴ Moreover, a recently issued report by the Tunis based Arab Women's Center for Research and Training anticipates that the number of Saudi businesswomen will increase to the extent that in near future it may even equal the number of businessmen.²⁵ The number of women registered in the local chambers of commerce and industry is on the increase. The Jeddah Chamber for example, has more than 2,000 women members out of a total membership of 50,000. In Riyadh, the figure is over 2,400 out of a total of 35,000 members and this represents

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Saudi Women Taste Public Life*, "BBC News", October 4, 1999, after "Al-Hayat", October 3, 1999.

²³ Frank Gardner, *Saudi Women Defy Business Curbs*, "BBC News", January 21, 2001.

²⁴ Samar Fatany, *The Status of Women in Saudi Arabia*, "Arab News", October 12, 2004.

²⁵ Mahmoud Ahmed, *Women Own 1,500 Businesses in Saudi Arabia*, "Arab News", January 5, 2003.

a fourfold increase in just ten years.²⁶ According to “Al-Madīna”, a local Arabic language daily, 70,000 Saudi businesswomen have now been issued commercial licenses, which enable them to establish their own businesses. Although there are no reliable statistics on how much of the Kingdom’s money is in the hand of Saudi businesswomen, some estimate the figure as high as 20%.²⁷ No doubt, women in Saudi Arabia are becoming an important element in the financial market. Adopting the new reality and meeting the expectations of Saudi businesswomen the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce has recently established the *Ḥadīḡa Bint Ḥuwālīd Center* to provide services for businesswomen, facilitate business opportunities and provide guidance to encourage women to run their own business.²⁸ It seems that not only the idea of this institution is significant, but also its name, which was given after the name of Ḥadīḡa, Prophet Muhammad’s first wife, the first successful Muslim businesswoman.

Saudi businesswomen appreciate the efforts of both the government and the local chambers of commerce to support them and provide with services but at the same time, they acknowledge that still much more needs to be done. Due to the increasing number of Saudi businesswomen the government has had to revise its 30-year-old labor laws and business proceedings so as to include women. In addition, as women’s income has become a significant element in the family budget, society’s attitude toward businesswomen is changing. According to some economists, Saudi women have substantial assets in real estate, jewelry, precious stones and metals, and therefore they are serious partners and clients for many foreign companies and corporations. For the same reason there is a mounting pressure to facilitate women’s direct involvement in running businesses, which is still much limited due to the fossilized tradition resulting in social restrictions imposed on Saudi women, such as ban on driving, sex segregation and strong subjection to male relatives.

Nowadays, many government and business leaders admit that Saudi women are better educated and more motivated than men. Therefore, if Saudi Arabia is serious about opening its market and becoming more competitive, it should take a more accurate look at allowing women to enter the work force. However, up till now, regardless of the unemployment rate in Saudi Arabia, which is about 8–30%,²⁹ depending on who is providing the figures, the potential of women’s power has been still wasted. Women account for 55% of Saudi graduates but they constitute only 4.8% of the work force. At present, only 5.5% of an estimated 4.7 million Saudi women of working age are employed and their career is largely restricted to the fields of medicine, education or women’s banking.³⁰ But female empowerment is still a painful issue for many conservative and fundamentalist elements in Saudi Arabia. But in Islamic circles, opinions differ widely. Some want women to be isolated in their houses and devote their lives completely to the family, others are

²⁶ Samar Faṭāny, op. cit.

²⁷ Mahmoud Aḥmed, op. cit.

²⁸ Samar Faṭāny, op. cit.

²⁹ Peyman Pejman, *Saudi Women Seek New Place in Society*, “The Washington Times”, April 21, 2004.

³⁰ Samar Faṭāny, op. cit.

willing to give them a role beyond family but on the condition to abide by some rules, such as sex segregation. Saudi economists stress the need for employing women and both political analysts as well as economists believe that the Kingdom's development is dependent on this matter. The government recognizes that without these human resources that have been marginalized for too long, no serious economic growth can take place. Economists estimated that at the end of 2004 women comprised some 8% of the public sector workforce.³¹ The main reason for the necessity to increase this number is the Saudi government's plan to replace expatriates with natives. Arrangements have been made to create many new jobs in order to reduce reliance on foreigners and force businesses to hire a maximum number of Saudis, including women.

The common acceptance of Saudi women as an equal part of a country's work force is crucial for both economic growth of the Kingdom and its international relations. The fact is that nowadays Saudi government needs a credible and measurable evidence for changes taking place in the country – the evidence strong enough to convince the international community about its good will and its aspirations to become a significant partner for powerful democratic countries. The necessity to improve women's status is essential to achieve this goal, especially now, when the world's public opinion witnessed shameful barring of Saudi women from voting in the elections of February 2005. For much of last year reform-minded royals have been engaged in heated debate with conservative clerics about the proposed participation of women in the municipal elections. It was clear from the beginning that women would not be allowed to run for the office but the question of their enfranchisement has been at the top of the agenda. Nor was this issue resolved when the text of bylaw regulating the voting procedures was published. It stated that "every citizen has the right to vote if they are over 21 years old, not in military and have been living in a constituency for a year before the election day".³² Male pronouns however, were used throughout the text increasing the ambiguity about whether this right would extend to everyone. According to official statements of the government the main reasons for excluding women from voting were the logistic problems resulting from the lack of a credible register of Saudi female citizens – as most of them still do not have their own ID – and the absence of polling stations prepared for women exclusively.

The decision to deny women the vote is in stark contrast to the vital role they have been playing in Saudi Arabia's latest development. Women currently hold many important positions, such as female managers, chief executives and directors in fields ranging from business and medicine to education. There are also thousands of women professors throughout the Kingdom reflecting an extremely high level of female education. In addition, Saudi Arabia supports one of the largest scholarship programs for women and thousands of Saudi women have earned doctorates from westerns universities.³³ Considering all those facts it seems obvious that barring women from voting was a setback to the reform movement in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the fact that the government

³¹ Ibid.

³² Nawaf Obaid, *Saudi Women Must Get the Vote in 2009*, "The Financial Times", October 13, 2004.

³³ Ibid.

deliberated for so long and that a favorable decision was so close, is a proof of increasing strength of women's empowerment in the Kingdom. It is also important to note that recent government's statements have referred specifically to the 2005 elections. Thus, hopefully the door should be opened to women in four years, when the next round of voting is supposed to take place.³⁴

The Middle East has been constantly changing and developing. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, although being the most restricted country of the region, has not resisted those transformations. Regardless of the pace of changes, which are rather evolutionary than revolutionary, a progress in social reforms in Saudi Arabia is consistent and visible. The government has acknowledged that admitting women to social and political life of the Kingdom is necessary for the sake of the country. Saudi Arabia's population growth rate is among the highest in the world and it surpasses the national economic growth. 60% of the population is below the age of twenty and more than 50% are women.³⁵ These statistics are both crucial and favorable for women, as they impose the need to improve their status and secure equal treatment for all citizens in accordance with Islamic principles of justice and nondiscrimination. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the protests against changes in women's status do not come only from conservative men. There are also women who prefer to maintain the *status quo*, and others who are disappointed with the slowness of the reforms and optical about the future. The most optimistic liberals and female enthusiasts of social changes believe it will take at least a generation to get rid of the fossilized Saudi tradition for Saudi Arabia to become alike Qatar, Oman or Bahrain – a modern Islamic country of this region where political and social life is shared by female and male citizens.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Samar F a t a n y, op. cit.