

Gender Inequality in Saudi Arabia

عدم المساواة بين الجنسين في السعودية

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Introduction:

Gender inequality is a huge dilemma in developed countries. According to the ChartsBin (2013) statistics about gender inequality, Saudi Arabia has a high indication of gender inequality. Middle East societies have distinct gender differences in rights and obligations in society. For many years, Western societies have focused on Saudi Arabia as one of the countries that has the highest gender segregation. Since Saudi Arabia is a country where they apply Islamic laws, the Western media blames the religion of Islam for creating gender inequality and not being fair to Muslim Women.

The role of women in general has been examined in many societies in the last few decades. Some societies believe that the role of women is staying at home, being a mother, and taking care of children; however, men are responsible for working in jobs and taking care of the financial situation in the house. According to Kinninmont (2006), 95% of the females in Saudi Arabia of a working age are housewives. This shows that Saudi society does not encourage women to work and has a belief that women should stay at home and focus on their families. The reason that some women get educated is because of a belief that educated girls increase their opportunity of getting married, but too much education will affect their marriage prospects. Around the King Abdullah era, women in Saudi Arabia started looking for equal rights because King Abdullah was more open to women rights. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has focused on developing education, political attitudes and the economy. The development considered sending Saudi females and males abroad to get a better education and deliver it back to help the country's development. This development also encourages Saudi women to look for their rights and opportunities in the Saudi society. In addition, we have seen many movements of Saudi women that look for equality in the matter of religion. Many have participated in politics in order to encourage the role of Saudi women in the community. Since the history have not mentioned any accomplishment of Saudi women, during the King Abdullah's era he announced that women are allowed to participate in Shura council (Aljazeera 2015).

This paper analyzes and explains the consequences of gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. This will be done by examining recent databases that were collected in order to identify whether gender inequality exists because of religious or social factors and also by also using the Islamic sources and scholars to explain the laws in Saudi Arabia that are related to gender inequality. The areas I analyze and

explain are the right for women to drive, education and employment rights, the guardianship law, the right to participate in politics and the right of polygamy for men. I explain the position of Saudi women in society and how their position is defined by religion.

WOMEN DRIVING IN SAUDI ARABIA:

Many men believe that women driving cars is actually more convenient for them. However, in Saudi Arabia only men are able to drive and women are not allowed to drive. In recent days, many women are standing up for this right, but it is a controversial issue that females be allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. Women were encouraged to focus on the issue of driving because King Abdullah supported the role of women in society. According to (Aljazeera 2015) website, King Abdullah focused on the development of the country and he supported the women rights to take part in the community. The website also mentioned one of his famous accomplishments he allowed women to participate in Shura council for the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia. After his death, he promised Saudi women to support them and allow them to drive in the future (Aljazeera, 2015). Then, women started an online campaign that called women to go behind the wheel and drive in October 26 2013. One of the famous activists who supported this campaign is Manal Alsharief (Ted Talks 2013). Manal Alsharief was the first woman who filmed her self while driving and posted it in order to encourage other women to go behind the wheel. After that, she was arrested for nine days for protesting women driving in Saudi Arabia. Her arrest was carried out by the religious police and her charge was a violation of custom. This was an indication that there is no law that prohibits females from driving. After that the debate of women driving in Saudi Arabia is rising. The first controversial reason is that women claim that religion does not prohibit women from driving. According to the website of Islamic concerns IslamQA (2015), The religious leader Shaykh ‘Abd al-Azeez ibn Baaz (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: “People have spoken a great deal in the *Aljazeera* newspaper about the issue of women driving cars.” The religious leader continued to state the reasons of why women do not drive in Saudi Arabia. He indicated that the action of women driving would lead to evil consequences, which are well known to those who promote it. To clarify, the consequences are being alone with a non-mahram or guardian, women unveiling themselves to men, the chance of involving with men, and committing prohibited actions that Islam forbid (IslamQA 2015). This statement explains the consequences of women driving in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Abdel-Mohsin Al-Obaikan and

Mohsin Awaji (2015) famous religious scholars have discussed the issue of women driving in Saudi Arabia. They stated that there is no law in Islam religion that prohibits women from driving and the custom and traditions of the Saudi society is the main reason of banning women to drive in Saudi Arabia. As the scholars stated that there is no law that ban women from driving and it is a concern of future consequences. Dr. Alsunaidi (2013) has discussed the main reason and concerns of women should drive in Saudi Arabia. He stated that the main reasons why women should be allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia are that driving will allow them to go to their work and also handle emergency situations in their lives easily. In addition, he claimed that driving is the basic right for women to practice and to be equal to men. The last reason he mentioned is that women driving will reduce the number of foreign drivers and this will help the country and the Saudi family economically. By doing a literature review and examining the religious scholars statements based on Islamic clues, the purpose of this analysis was to explain the reasons and concerns of why women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. After doing this analysis, I can say that the Saudi culture and society plays a huge role in the matter of women driving in Saudi Arabia. In addition, after examining religious scholars that stated that the religion of Islam does not forbid women from driving, it is clearly a matter of concern for the future and the fear of the consequences of a new role for women.

Education and employment rights for women:

The system of schooling in Saudi Arabia segregates females from males. In the 1960s, the first informal school for girls was opened in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (AlMunajjed 1997). During that time, the primary education system was religious courses such as Quran, Hadith and Sunna. Those courses focus on educating children about the religion of Islam (Doumato 2000). At the King Faisal era, formal schools were launched and many girls had the opportunity to get an appropriate education (Sasson 2012). The society was not familiar with the idea of women attending schools and getting education at that time because it was a new idea. These days we can see that women are making progress in education. The role of government was obviously supporting women accomplishments in Saudi Arabia and the decisions that were made are taken by the royal family (AlMunajjed 1997). Here we can see the part that the government is helping to develop the country in many ways. Moreover, in the era of King Abdullah and his accomplishments in developing higher education, he created King Abdullah Scholarship Program. According to Study E Broad website, "A noble royal approval was issued by King Abdullah ibn Abdulaziz,

may Allah save him, to extend King Abdullah Foreign scholarship program for a third phase that lasts 5 years, starting after end of the current phase by end of fiscal year 2014 (1435/1436), said minister of higher education Dr. Khalid ibn Mohammad Al Ankary in a statement” (Study E board 2015). There are many advantages in creating this program. According to the Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission in the U.S. “The mission of the scholarship program is to prepare and qualify Saudi human resources in an effective manner so that they will be able to compete on an international level in the labor market and the different areas of scientific research, and thereby become an important source of supply of highly qualified individuals for Saudi universities as well as the government and private sectors” (The Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission). This statement shows the importance of studying abroad and the improvements that could be implied in the education of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi females were involved in this program and they also have the opportunity to continue their degree by a full scholarship that is covered by their universities; however, the process of making the decisions of teacher assistance studying abroad is complicated. According to the *Almarsd* newspaper, Saudi universities impose through their websites a written pledge that consists of obtaining their degree abroad and bringing within a year the academic acceptance from a recognized university board. The newspaper posted a picture of the written pledge that consists the requirements that the university ask from the lecturer. Moreover, *Almarsd* newspaper “Article VI of the Rules of scholarship and training issued by the Ministry of Higher Education that the scholarship decision internally or externally is, however, the council of the university administration and committees scholarship, namely, the executive issue seemed far from directing the minister as invoked the formal system does not oral route” (Almarsd 2014). The statement of the newspaper emphasized that the decision of studying abroad is made by the university not the Ministry of Education, since the ministry offers the option of choosing either external or internal scholarship. This shows us that many decisions including the socioeconomic status of the students are made without considering the ministry decision on the situation. When it comes to women pursuing their education, many obstacles could emerge. According to Buchmann et al. (2008), the research argued the gender inequality in education and the differences between females and males. Since females are doing much better than males, the chances of Saudi females continuing their higher education are high. Saudi women face many obstacles when they chose to pursue their higher education. One of the conditions in applying to study abroad is they cannot travel

without their guardians' approval. In addition, the guardians of these women should accompany them during their study. The difficulty of this situation is that many women suffer with this condition: either their guardians cannot travel with them or they will not give them the approval. Many women dreams got crushed when they face this kind of problem and they will not continue their education.

When it comes to the employment rights for Saudi women. According to the Women Living in Muslim Laws (WLML) website, women in this decade are more likely to look for their goals and achievements. The website discussed the issue of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia. The development of the country played a huge role in Saudi womens' lives. This development created many job opportunities in the economic aspect and other opportunities for Saudi women (WLML). A study that was published by Booz and Company described the challenges of women in the workplace in Saudi Arabia. The study stated, "Women in the Saudi labor force had an unemployment rate of 26.9 percent—nearly four times that of men in 2007" (AlMunajied, 2010). That was because of the development of the country and is economic. The jobs that women are more likely to employ in are in educational and administrative sector (AlMunajied, 2010). The study stated: "This is not to say that simply getting a degree enables Saudi Arabia's females to join the labor market—unfortunately, it does not. Indeed, according to Deputy Minister for Labor Abdul Wahid Al-Humaid, most unemployed women are highly - qualified: 78.3 percent of the mare university graduates, and more than 1,000 have a doctorate. By contrast, 76 percent of unemployed men - have only a secondary education or lower" (AlMunajjed 2013). Here we can see that there is more than getting a degree in order to be qualified for getting a job. The requirements for getting or applying to a job are getting more complicated. It is also suggested that women in Saudi Arabia are not able to enter the workforce and get jobs because of their lack of education and the lack of encouragement from their husbands or family members. It is easy to see that females in Saudi Arabia are capable, but lack education and training in order to be qualified to enter the workforce. We can also see the important effect of family and husbands in motivating women to participate in the development of the country.

The government supports women in Saudi Arabia in many ways. They allow women 10 weeks for maternity leave. Men are not allowed to take a paternity leave (The World Bank Data 2013).

The females' education in Saudi Arabia has a lot of gaps that should be covered. Here I examined the past and present state of

education for women and the factors that caused these states. The government of Saudi Arabia and the royal family has focused on how to make women participate in the community. They provided many opportunities and supports to encourage women in society. After examining the data I provided above, I can conclude that not many women are able to involve in the workforce because of the lack of education and support from their society. The society of Saudi Arabia is still suffering from cultural beliefs that inhibit women from creativity. The reason of this inhibition is that the male-dominated society is concerned about women doing actions that they think Islam prohibits.

The guardianship law:

The Saudi women suffer from the male guardianship laws. According to the Equality Now Organization, women in Saudi Arabia do not have freedom in some aspects in their lives. They need their husbands, father, brothers or their son in order to practice life normally (Equality Now Organization 2014). The equality now organization mentioned the aspects where women need the consent of their male guardianship, marriage, divorce, education, freedom of movement, healthcare, employment and access to justice (Equality now 2010). Saudi females need a permission from their relative guardianship or husbands in order to live their lives. When it comes to marriage and divorce, girls in any age are more likely to get married than divorced without their approval by their male guardian. Females can also be divorced from their husbands, but only with the support of their male guardian (Equality now, 2010). In Islam religion, a famous religious scholar Salman Alaudah indicated in one of his popular TV shows that the approval of male guardian of the girl is not required in the Islam religion (Laha magazine, 2010). This statement shows that some conditions about the male guardianship are not required by religion but are required by the society. In another case, once women disapprove marrying from a man, it is prohibited to force her to marry him in Islam (Okaz, 2011).

The permission of male guardian is required in some aspects of Saudi women lives. In the Equality Now Organization, girls cannot get education without the permission of her male guardian (Equality now, 2010). When I searched about the Islam prospective in requiring the permission of male guardian in order to get education, The Islam religion did not mention any kind of requirement in order to get education. It is required from the male guardian to motivate their children to get education. The Islam religion also prohibits the men from barring women from education (IslamQA 2015).

Another aspect that Saudi women are required to get permission in is the freedom of movement. The equality now organization claimed that females in Saudi Arabia are not able to get a passport without the permission of a male guardian or her husband (Equality Now Organization 2010). In this case, I also searched for the religious perspective about Saudi females cannot apply for a passport without the permission of a guardian male or the husband permission. The organization also mentioned that women in Saudi Arabia can not travel without the permission of her male guardian (Equality now 2010). In the Saudi Cultural Mission website, one of the conditions of studying abroad is getting the permission of the male guardian. In addition, it is a required condition to travel with the female and stay with her during her scholarship (Safer 2015). The Islamic answer to this matter is “A woman can only travel with a Mahram, i.e. a male with whom her marriage is forbidden eternally viz. her father, son, brother, uncle, grandfather, etc. In the case of a married woman she can be accompanied by her husband” (Islam great religion 2009). It is stated in the religion of Islam that women can travel, but only with their male guardian.

Saudi women are not allowed admit into or discharge from a government hospital without the permission of a male guardian (Equality Now 2010). This is an obvious gender inequality situation that even religious law does not mention. “A woman cannot make decisions regarding medical care, including family planning, for herself or her children without the permission of her husband or male guardian” (Equality Now 2010). It is complicated to require a permission of the male guardian of a woman in an emergency situation.

Women are also suffering from this same male guardian rule with respect to employment (Equality Now, 2010). The Equality Now Organization claimed that the women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to get a job without the permission of their guardian male or husband. In addition, women need to get permission for establishing a business. This is an important aspect in Saudi women lives that allows them to participate in the society. Having male guardian rule will impede their movement forward to find their crucial part in the community. The religion of Islam requires men to be in charge for women in general, but it does not require men to give permission for getting a job (The Religion of Piece 2006). This is proof that Islam is less restrictive than the Saudi society believes.

The final aspect in women life that is required the permission or presence of a male guardian is the access to justice. Going to a police station filing a claim is an easy task to do in many counties, on the

other hand, in Saudi Arabia women can not enter the police station or go to the court without a male guardian next to them.

The law of guardianship in Saudi Arabia seems to be complicated in many ways. As a country where they apply the Islamic laws, some of the guardianship laws were not mentioned in Islam religion as I stated above. According to the religion of peace website, it is mentioned in the Quran that men should be in charge of women: "Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them." – Qur'an (4:34)

It appears that Islamic religion requires Muslim men to be in charge of women. Thus, getting permission from her guardian male is justified under this interpretation. Nonetheless, recently many activist women have stood up for their rights to end the male guardianship that affects their everyday lives (Albawba 2012)

Political positions for saudi women:

The political system in Saudi Arabia is a hereditary monarchy system. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by Abdulaziz bin Abd al-Rahman Al Saud (Ibn Saud) (Helen Ziegler & Association 2015). In the era of King Abdullah who ruled the Kingdom 2005 many of the laws have changed. For example, "in February 2009, King Abdullah appointed Norah Al-Fayez to be the first female cabinet-level official, a deputy minister for women's education. She had formerly had worked as an official in the Saudi Institute for Public Administration" (Helen Ziegler and association 2015). This announcement showed that in the era of King Abdullah, women had the chance to be included in the society. Moreover, the first Shura council was established the year 1924 (The Shura Council). The aim of the Shura council was to discuss and advise the King about the important issue of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Helen Ziegler and association 2015). In the King Abdullah's era he announced the most important step in the history of Saudi Arabia when he said that women should participate in the Shura council. In fact, he commanded that the council should have 20% female membership in the council (Helen Ziegler and association). This announcement encouraged women in Saudi Arabia and supported their position in the society. Females now get the chance to state their opinion and their issues to the council. According to Badawi who wrote the position of women in Islam, the Islamic religion

encourages women to take political positions in the country. She has the right to vote and the right to nominate for political affairs. The evidence of this matter is that women used to discuss and argue with the prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings be upon him) himself (see the Noble Quran 58:14 and 60:10-12) (Badawi 2015).

The Islam religion values the women status in all aspects of her life. In the matter of the political position, women were allowed to argue and state their opinion with the prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings be upon him). They recently get the chance to participate in one of the crucial councils in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to state their opinion about the issue that the Saudi society face. This was a huge step that King Abdullah made for the development of the country.

The polygamy right for men:

One of the controversial topics that many argue about is the right to polygamy for men (Islamology Organization 2015). Many claim that this law demonstrates the discrimination between men and women. Since Saudi Arabia a country where they apply Islamic laws, it is allowed for men to marry more than one woman. There is wisdom in allowing men to marry more than women according to Islam. As the Islamology Organization indicates, the law of polygamy has advantages and disadvantages as many other Islamic laws. However, the advantages are more than the disadvantages for this matter. Under some circumstances, husbands are allowed to have a second marriage. One of the circumstances were the husband is allowed the polygamy right is if he wants children and his wife is not able to have kids. In this case men are allowed to ask for the polygamy right (Islamology Organization 2015). In addition, the court studies the case before marrying them. Although it allows for polygamy, Islam “warns about the difficulty of dealing justly between multiple wives” (Why Islam 2015). This emphasizes how women are valued in Islam and how their feelings are considered in the matter of polygamy.

Another controversial question that could be asked in the case of polygamy which is, is it fair that the polygamy right is allowed for men? The Islamology organization has explained the options that the first wife could consider. When a man and a woman are getting married they have a contract where they state the conditions that they want from the other partner, Islam allow women to consider the condition of not having a second wife in her contract and the husband should accept this condition. Moreover, wives are allowed to file a claim against their husbands when their husbands want a second wife with out meeting the circumstances outlines above. The Islamology Organization offers an

explanation of the right of polygamy for men and how Islam is flexible toward women's concerns.

CONCLUSION:

It is true that the Saudi society has large amounts gender inequality. After examining the right for women to drive, I came to conclude that it is a matter of tradition and not religion. The evidence proves that the Islam religion does not prohibit women from driving. Instead, it values the woman's position in society. In addition, explaining the religious scholars point of view about women driving in Saudi Arabia answered the question of why women cannot drive yet in Saudi Arabia. The scholars claim that women driving will affect the society and could lead to evil actions that Islam prohibits.

Gender inequality in the society is large with respect to education and employment. Women still suffer from inequality in education and employment. Many studies have indicated that women in Saudi Arabia have a lack of education in their future jobs. These studies suggest that the ministry of education should focus in developing women since women's development affects the country. Islam religion has focused on the advantages of education and how it is important in Muslims' lives. In addition, the religion of Islam requires parents and guardians to encourage the importance of education.

The male guardianship law is another factor that increases gender inequality that is considered in my paper. The guardianship law creates a lot of obstacles in the Saudi women lives. In Saudi Arabia, women are required to get permission of their guardians to continue and get education. They are also required this kind of permission in starting a new business. As a result, the guardianship law limits the development and the advancement of Saudi women. Furthermore, Islam religion does require the existence and the permission of the guardians; however, it is not heavily required in some cases. The paper also examined the issue of political positions of Saudi women in the country. Recently, King Abdullah has announced that women can participate in the Shura council (The Shura Council 2015). Before this announcement women did not get the chance to participate in political position for the country. The announcement helped Saudi women to reach their voices to reach to the society. Islam religion encourages the role of women in politics. Islam motivates women to discuss and argue as they used to argue with the prophet Mohammad (peace and blessings be upon him) himself (see the Noble Quran 58:14 and 60:10-12) (Badawi 2015).

The last factor that was addressed in my paper is the polygamy right for men. Men in the Islam religion are allowed to marry more than

one woman. Saudi Arabia allows the polygamy right, but Islam emphasizes that the use of the polygamy right should be only allowed in circumstances. This law creates a lot of controversy about the religion of Islam in creating gender inequality. But Islam respects women's emotions about the polygamy and offers a lot of options to consider.

This paper offers many places that have gender inequality in the Saudi society. The findings of my paper are that the gender inequality in Saudi Arabia is created by traditions and beliefs. The analysis of religious and scholarly evidence from the Quran has proved that Islam is flexible in many ways. Islam can be used to support and value the position of women in the society.

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