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Striving for autonomy and feminism: What possibilities for Saudi Women?

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Abstract

Caught in a web of cultural and religious conservatism, a totalitarian government that does not permit any form of civil society organisation, it is hardly surprising to note that before 1991 Saudi women could not mobilise in a movement to demand their confiscated rights. Until very recently, Saudi women were deprived of suffrage rights, freedom of movement, and the right to own their bodies and act freely without the consent of their male guardians. This article traces Saudi women's trajectory to secure citizenship rights and achieve autonomy against the threat of a conservatism that is deeply imbedded in the Saudi socio-cultural fabric.

Keywords: Feminism; autonomy; Saudi women

Introduction: Context

Before becoming the kingdom that we know today, Saudi Arabia has undergone numerous fundamental socio-historical changes, mainly accelerated by the 1970s oil boom. Prior to that, and by dint of its location and climate, Saudi Arabia was known as a desert nation mainly consisting of nomadic tribal social classes whose economy was predominantly based on trade. This lifestyle made the trading men leave their families for extended periods, during which women stayed in their tribes taking care of household duties and their children. At the time when King Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdul Rahman Al Saud founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, women were largely invisible in society, and their roles were restricted to procreation and housework. Although in rural/tribal settings women enjoyed more freedom of movement within their tribes, and contributed to work outside their tents, in the same manner as their more severely controlled urban sisters, they did not hold social position of any sorts. Bereft of any form of authority over their bodies, they were subjected to a strict male guardianship system, which stipulates that men be in charge of women at all stages of their life. Although often justified by Qur'anic belief, and consolidated by Ulamas' religious fatwas, this rule is strictly enforced by patriarchy and Wahhabi ideology, which saw

women as central to its mission to reform society from all practices deemed contrary to the tenets of Islam.

In effect, under such a conservative system, women were not solely watched over by their official male guardians but by all male relatives and by the whole society. Young women in particular are subject to extensive surveillance from extended family members and neighbours, who watch all their movements. Central to this is the concern about women's reputation as they are central to their families' honour. This construct is enforced by a strict form of gender segregation, which is part of the dominating patriarchal culture and is deeply imbedded in the Saudi social fabric of both urban and tribal settings. It is a central constituent of Saudi identity that is reflected in the organisation of the Saudi tent that carefully integrates this segregation of the sexes, with specific spaces for each of the genders.

Although the economic boom of the 1970s has fundamentally influenced the political and socio-economic structures and institutions in Saudi Arabia, and accelerated an unprecedented process of urbanisation that transformed the lives of various groups (Al-Rasheed 2010), it has not changed this ancient structure of gender segregation. On the contrary, women are more restricted in urban settings where the organisation of the Saudi tent is carefully integrated into modern houses that are designed with specific spaces for men and women. This form of structured gender segregation is also strictly replicated in educational establishments, which ultimately led to gender segregation in political, economic, and labour force environments. In short, it is extended into every aspect of Saudi life where all institutions are strictly segregated, resulting thus forth in the population being divided into two distinct male and female sub-cultures, with two entirely different interactional norms with features of register exclusive to each gender. The segregation of the genders and the professional constraints placed on women are a means of excluding them and a form of social control over their mobility (Al-Rasheed 2010; Doumato 1992, 1999). This condition is sustained by the historic alliance of the Al-Saud dynasty with the Wahhabi movement whose mission, although religious-based, has a strong political resolve attached to it and far-reaching ramifications in the structuring of Saudi culture and society at the centre of which are gender relations. According to Al-Rasheed (2013: 19), the interaction between the state, religious nationalism (Wahhabism), and social and cultural forms of patriarchy are a combination of elements, which contribute to the strict control of Saudi women, and attributes gender inequality to religious nationalism. In other words, in order to secure the stability of the monarchy, the Saudi monarchs worked towards appeasing the local/tribal patriarchy on the one hand and the Wahhabi religious revivalist movement on the other. Consequently, the state's judicial and constitutional systems are based on Islamic Wahhabi teachings, which claim 'to represent Islam in its purest form' (Commins 2006: vv). In order to achieve this goal, the state adopted the Takfir ideology. Largely explained as the tendency to declare a fellow Muslim as guilty of apostasy, Takfir entails the act of 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' by reprimanding, punishing, and even stoning anyone who did not strictly follow Islamic religious teachings. Through a regulated rule of social control by the Mutawwi'in (religious police) established in 1926, Wahhabism exercised an effective influence on public opinion and has deeply shaped people's attitudes and perceptions of Islam.

Girls' education and the empowerment of Saudi Women

When King Saud instituted boys' public primary education in the 1930s, his project was fiercely rejected by conservative families for fear of deviating their children from their Islamic beliefs and the risk of contaminating their cultural values. Such reactions and their careful handling by the ruling monarchy go to testify to the accomplishment of Wahhabism's position as the framer of religious morals and ideals of true Islam in both the state and society. It took great efforts and persuasion before Saudi families finally consented to send their boys to government schools whose curricula, although borrowed from neighbouring Arab nations, were carefully selected to suit the Saudi cultural specificity. It was therefore not conceivable at that time to even mention educating girls. It took another three decades before King Faisal could formally introduce girls' education by royal decree in 1964, and even then, his project was challenged with stiff resistance from the conservatives who saw it as 'compromising to female morality and a vehicle of Westernisation' (Arebi 1994: 33).

Although by the 1950s, educated young Saudi men urged the government to establish schools for girls, their voices were obfuscated by those of the Wahhabi conservatives. As young educated men, they complained that they needed educated wives whom they could not find in their own society, and often times they resorted to marry non-Saudi women which led to a serious social problem 'with Saudi girls remaining single as the number of men marrying foreign women reached more than one hundred per annum' (Almunajjed 1997: 61). Through their published articles, they argued that women's education would benefit Saudi society as a whole, but especially their children and husbands, and their nation.

King Faisal supported this view, arguing that educated women make good Muslim mothers who would teach the Qur'an to their children. Although he treaded carefully so as not to upset the religious order, his view was not at all shared by the conservatives who greeted the calls for girls' education with stiff resistance amounting to public demonstrations in the Najd province where government troops had to intervene to restore order (Almunajjed 1997: 62-63).

To counter the religious debate that argued that education for women would uproot them from their natural place (the home), and undermine their God-given role as homemakers, King Faisal responded by quoting Islamic sources. He presented the mission of 'seeking knowledge' as a religious obligation of both male and female Muslims, and insisted there is nothing in the Qur'an that prohibits women's education. He told the conservatives: 'There is no cause for argument between us. As learning is incumbent on every Muslim, we shall open the school' (Almunajjed 1997: 63). Nevertheless, he did not make girls' education obligatory but left it up to the parents to decide whether to send their daughters to school or keep them at home. To reassure worried parents and concerted religious conservatives, the King pledged that education would not deviate their daughters from the nation's religious culture, and promised to guarantee total adherence to Islamic teachings and local traditions and customs. Furthermore, he gave guarantees of having the education system supervised and managed by his most trusted religious authorities. Almunajjed explains, 'Faisal decided to work hand in hand with the Ulama within the traditional power structure' (1997: 63). However, enshrining education in this religious framework deeply contributed to the shaping of the first generations of educated Saudi women. This was unduly intensified

by the work of the Female members of the Islamic Brotherhood, many of whom were from Syria and Egypt, who were particularly successful in coaxing their young pupils to reject degenerate Western culture and adopt full Islamic veiling in the form of the full niqab (Lacey 2009: 56). According to Al-Rasheed (2010), this dress code, which was intended to be a means of protecting women, was yet another form of gender segregation and female seclusion, making women semi-visible in the public sphere.

Although prior to 1960, public institutions offering formal girls' education were non-existent in Saudi Arabia, some affluent and middle-class families resorted to home tutoring their girls. They then sent them to neighbouring Arab countries to pursue higher education, to become the first generation of Saudi female graduates who later turned out to be the first teachers in the newly opened girls' schools in the 1960s. Despite the aforementioned strict conditions which control girls' education in Saudi Arabia, the opening of girls' schools marked a new era for Saudi women who prior to that date they were banned from working or studying in formal public institutions.

In her book, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, Almunajjed (1997: 59) affirms that education in Saudi Arabia is the area in which women have experienced the greatest progress. It is, in fact, the legitimate reason that brought them out of their seclusion, and a fate changer that enabled them to enter a new world that was denied to their mothers' generation. The first generation of female teachers, whose educational trajectory was a result of their families' support and sacrifices against the views of a society fiercely opposed to girls' education, became the first Saudi women to enter the job market and take on paid employment. In the 1960s, the female teachers and their pupils marked not only a change in the canvas of the Saudi public sphere, which now incorporated women and girls regularly going to school and work, but also a radical change in their own destinies as educated women.

Although female education in Saudi Arabia is enshrined in restrictions of all kinds, Saudi women have tremendously gained from schooling in such enormous strides that in recent years they surpassed their male compatriots in educational achievements. According to Al-Heis (2011), women overtook men as the majority of the country's university graduates at an average rate of 2.5 times that of male graduates during the last ten years. Having secured this level of success in education, it would be interesting to evaluate the levels of empowerment and self-fulfilment achieved by Saudi women, and ask whether these gains in education have opened new doors for them.

It has to be emphasised, however, that because Saudi women attained these realisations in spite of the many obstacles put on their educational trajectories, this achievement is in itself a self-fulfilling accomplishment. With much determination, they continue to exist and struggle against a monolith of discriminatory measures.

Discriminatory measures in girls education

Because girls' education was initially introduced as key to making them good mothers and ideal homemakers, its general framework continued to reinforce discriminatory gender roles and women's second-class status. Article 153 of the Saudi Policy on Education stipulates, 'A girl's education aims at giving her the correct Islamic education to enable her to be in life a successful housewife, an exemplary wife and a good mother' (Human Rights Watch 2008: 14). This objective has had enormous implications on the girls' curricula, which included lessons in housekeeping, upbringing of

children, in addition to courses in monotheism and jurisdiction (Almunajjed 1997: 64). These were intended to prepare her 'to do things which suit her nature, like teaching, nursing and giving medical treatment' (Al Zaid 1981: 56).

Hamdan argues that these discriminatory measures, which are obvious in the Saudi education system, are institutionalised and difficult to dislodge through individual action. She clarifies that this state of affairs is partly due to the fact women's inequality is traditionally structured in Saudi society, and explains how gender ideologies that can be attributed to traditional socio-economic values gained legal force by being associated with Islamic teachings (Hamdan 2005: 45). This combination of patriarchy and religious extremism has led to the normalisation of gender differences in the curriculum content at all school stages, unequal access to learning resources, and the restricting of women's access to the job market after their graduation. Women's choices of career paths were also restricted, as it was commonly believed that 'acceptable' jobs for women were limited to teaching and nursing as two professions that best suit their caring nature as women.

Although Saudi Arabia acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1996, it continued to discriminate against female children in the field of education to the level of attracting world attention to this situation. In 2001, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed serious concern that Saudi Arabia's 'policy on education for girls (e.g. articles 9 and 153 of the 1969 Policy of Education) discriminates against girls and is incompatible with article 29 (a) of the Convention' (Human Rights Watch 2008: 14). Nevertheless, entrusting girls' education to the Department of Religious Guidance rather than the Ministry of Education meant that the state could not intervene and address the shortfalls. The change to this situation had to wait for the 11 March 2002 tragedy, following a fire incident at an elementary girls' school in Mecca, to receive government's attention.

The incident, which resulted in the bereavement of 15 girls and the injury of numerous others, could have been prevented if the Mutawwi'in (religious police) did not stand in the way of rescue workers claiming the students were not wearing their abayas and, possibly, because their guardians were not present. According to journalists and eyewitnesses, several girls who tried to escape were sent back from the school gates and were prevented to exit the school. In addition, the many volunteers who tried to intervene were prevented from entering the school premises to save the girls. This occurrence left many Saudis in shock and disdain about the fanaticism of the religious police whose actions were condemned both inside the country and internationally. A Saudi government inquiry concluded that religious educational authorities were responsible for neglecting fire safety measures in the school, but rejected the accusation that the actions of the religious police contributed to the deaths of the 15 girls and the injuries of many of their peers and teachers. As a result, authority for the administration of girls' schools was removed from the Department of Religious Guidance and was placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

On 14 March 2002, Hanny Megally, Executive Director of the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch declared, 'Women and girls may have died unnecessarily because of extreme interpretations of the Islamic dress code' (Human Rights Watch 2002). While he points the finger of accusation to the religious police who did not allow the girls to exit the school without their headscarves or abayas, he identifies gender segregation as the main reason behind this tragedy. Other reasons

include the lack of safety measures in the school building, which was rented by the Department of Religious Guidance and was not inspected by the government.

As mentioned above, the standard of educational facilities allocated for girls' were well below those allocated to boys' education. This condition persisted well beyond the 2002 fire incident after which girls' education was entrusted to the Ministry of education, and has led to a wave of protests by female university students between 2011-2012, culminating in the protest at King Khalid University in the Saudi town of Abha. According to a report by Al-Jazeera, 8,000 female students organised a demonstration on their campus to protest about sanitation conditions. According to the report (12 March 2012), 'At least 50 female students have been injured after security forces tried to break up a protest earlier this week'. On the other hand, BBC World News reported on 8 March 2012, 'There have been several protests at Saudi universities, or involving recent female Saudi graduates over the past year, mainly complaining about a system that is biased against them'. In the absence of a free national press that would broadcast the true story about their demonstration, the students resorted to social media and posted videos about the event. Furthermore, in a desperate act to let the world know about their ordeal, they reached out to international news agencies by telephone to tell their own story. Although the demonstration was brutally put down by the police, this event constitutes a milestone in Saudi women's mobilisation to demand their citizenship rights. Noting that public dissent and civil society organisations, including women's groups, are generally prohibited in Saudi Arabia, it is particularly difficult for women's rights activists to demand legal reform and organise themselves in an officially acknowledged women's movement.

Freedom of movement

Although Saudi women gained the right of entry to the public sphere, they are not granted access to all establishments in their cities. Furthermore, they can only enter the public sphere if they are dressed in a strict form of covering, which in very conservative cities such as Riyadh includes the covering of the face. This regulated dress code was enforced by the Mutawwi'in who until very recently severely controlled the public sphere, thus stifling the younger generations of female and male Saudis. They especially kept close watch on women lest they did not cover up adequately. Under their black uniform covering, all women look the same and when they cover their faces, they are virtually unidentifiable. Homogenising women's dress code in mixed public spaces 'produces two social worlds, of which one is subordinate to the other' (Le Renard 2014: 9), and where one is white and the other is black.

Central to this form of covering is the concern with women's reputation. Young women in particular are subject to extensive scrutiny from close relatives, acquaintances, and even the neighbours. Existing norms of respectability were reinforced by fundamentalist/Sahwi ideology that influenced the ways women are able to get around in the city, which resulted in women having to negotiate activities outside their homes with their families. Unless a woman studies or works, her access to the outside is not justified and has to be granted by her male guardian. Here again, one has to specify that not all women are subjected to the same restrictions regarding mobility. Social divisions and the good will of the guardians play an important role in the way a woman leads her life. What all women share, however, is the impact of the Sahwi

fundamentalists, whose influence reached a crescendo in the 1980s-1990s, on social norms. Their power is often disseminated through their hateful/misogynist preaches which propagate cultural tropes about Saudi women that dominated societal debates for many years. Nora Doaiji cites some of the most protuberant of these: 'Saudi women are privileged queens who need not leave the home as they receive the protection and care of religiously minded Saudi men; and Saudi women are like unwrapped candies and must remain covered lest they spoil or be pursued by others desiring their sweetness' (Doaiji 2017: 3-4).

Nevertheless, empowered by the higher level of education they have received in comparison with their mothers' generation, younger women poked fun at such rhetoric and negotiated their mobility and access to the public sphere outside school and work hours. In her book, *A Society of Young Women*, Amélie Le Renard explores Saudi women's strategies of negotiating young urban Saudi femininities as well as new ways of adapting and structuring these female 'public' spaces. She speaks of an 'archipelago of spaces' (Le Renard 2014: 6) accessible to women, such as women university campuses, religious spaces, the workplace, and women-only shopping malls, where spaces accessible to women have expanded and Saudi women's professional activity has increased. She argues that by congregating in these spaces, not only do women claim their place in the public sphere, but they also find ways of transgressing rules and resisting the heavy constraints imposed by the conservatives in the public sphere. These forms of homosociality provide a space for leisure and exchange among young women, and while they are sought as leisurely escapades, they constitute a form of dissidence to the norms preached by the conservatives in terms of opposition to Western cultural practices expressed through these women's extensive consumerist culture. In the absence of variety of leisure outlets, many spend their time and resources on shopping for high-end and designer labels and use these gatherings as an opportunity for presenting them amongst peers. Nevertheless, there remain clear boundaries imposed by a well-anchored shame/honour culture that these young women hesitate to cross. Furthermore, these outings are often negotiated and are not granted *de facto*. Being under a strict guardianship system, women would not leave their homes without the permission of their male guardians. In addition, in the absence of freedom of mobility and the ban imposed on women to drive cars, they would need to be driven or escorted to the meeting place. These two issues constitute the most perilous obstacles, which hamper women's mobility and control their lives.

Saudi Women and the right to drive cars

Until June 2017, Saudi Arabia was the only country in the world where women were not permitted to drive motor vehicles. Although this rule did not have any religious backing, religious authorities in the country insisted on maintaining the ban through the incessant issuing of fatwas prohibiting women from driving.

The advent of the Gulf war in 1990 brought American soldiers and personnel of both genders to Saudi Arabia, allowing for a great level of interaction with the locals, especially between Saudi men and American women. The latter not only broke the imposed dress code on women, but more importantly they drove their cars and moved freely in society, making Saudi women question why they could not do the same, especially amidst the permissive atmosphere brought by the war.

However, although many argue that this American presence was the motor behind Saudi women's act of challenging the driving ban, one should not oversee their close interaction with Kuwaiti women who took refuge in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the invasion of Kuwait, and their influence on Saudi women with whom they shared the same religious beliefs.

Other factors that motivated Saudi women to make this decisive move include the Saudi government's call in September 1990 for government agencies to train women volunteers to work in civil defence and medical services. According to Doumato, 'The response was one of elation by women who hoped it would be the beginning of a much larger role for women in the work force' (1992: 31). Women from all ranks, including the royal family, and from all regions, including the arch-conservative town of Buraidah which saw demonstrations against girls' education in the 1960s, attended training sessions. Doumato elucidates, 'The King's alignment with the United States and his bold initiative for women's civil defence work appeared to hold out the possibility of a decline in religious-conservative influence and the further opening of Saudi society to the West' (ibid.).

This gave rise to feelings of optimism, especially among educated women who saw the King's commitment to increasing women's participation in public life as an opportunity to stage a demonstration to demand the lifting of the driving ban. On the timing of this demonstration, many argued that the presence of global media in the area during the Gulf War represented a golden opportunity for Saudi women to voice their desire for change. Holding the demonstration before the eyes of the whole world would not only allow the event to be broadcast on a global scale, but also because they believed the presence of these media would give them a kind of protection from possible reprisals from the state or the religious police.

On 6 November 1990, a group of 47 Saudi women who held international drivers licenses decided to lead a protest demonstration by driving through the roads of Riyadh city, only to be arrested by the Mutawwi'in who handed them to the police. Their passports were confiscated and those who held teaching positions were suspended from their jobs.

In deep disillusionment, the activists saw the government and the religious police reacting as one with the Interior Ministry coming down firmly on the side of the religious police, making the previously unofficial ban on women's driving cars official, and issuing a ban on all political activity by women in the future. Furthermore, the Directorate of Islamic Research, Ruling, Propaganda and Guidance, headed by Shaikh Abdallah ibn Abdulaziz ibn Baz, issued a fatwa which stipulates that women should not be allowed to drive cars because Sharia instructs that the things that degrade or harm the dignity of women must be prevented.

In effect, looking closely at the contradictions inherent in the state's position, one can only conclude that women's bodies became sites on which the nation's identity was fought and negotiated. It is clear at this critical period in Saudi history that the state was caught between its aspirations for openness, economic adversity resulting from the cost of the war and the decline in oil revenues, and its historical allegiance to Wahhabi ideology.

In their book, *Sixth of November: Women and the Driving Issue*, two of the 47 participants in the Riyadh protest, Aishah Almanea and Hissah Al-Shaykh, recount in detail the events that led up to the demonstration, their arrest, and its aftermath.

They explain that the preparation took three planning meetings. The first meeting was held in October 1990, when Noura Al-Ghanem and her sister Sarah visited Al-Shaykh in her office. The second meeting took place on 24 October 1990 in the house of Noura Al-Ghanem. On that day, the gathered women composed a letter to King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz, who was then the Mayor of Riyadh, appealing to him to look sympathetically at their plight. The letter goes, 'In the name of every ambitious Saudi woman eager to serve her country under the leadership of the Servant of the Two Holy Shrines and his wise government to open your paternal heart to us and to look sympathetically on our humane demand, to drive in Riyadh' (Doumato 1992: 32). The final meeting took place on 5 November 1990 in the house of Nadia Al-Abdalli, and the women decided that the next day they would drive through the streets of Riyadh (Al-Manea and Al-Shaykh 2013: 27-38).

In the introductory chapter of their book, Al-Manea and Al-Shaykh discuss the marginalised status of Saudi women before the protest. They explain that the women who took part in the driving protest were fully responsible for their act and politically aware of the consequences. They were not afraid of being arrested as much as they dreaded the religious police and their vehement opposition to the lifting of the ban on women's driving (Al-Manea and Al-Shaykh 2013: 8). They were also wary of their venomous propaganda campaigns of slander, which would tarnish their reputation and status in society. In effect, on the day after the demonstration, the Mutawwi'in posted the names and ages of the 47 women on a placard that read, 'Here are the names of the sluts who advocate vice and corruption on the earth' (Doumato 1992: 31). Furthermore, they were subjected to campaigns of harassment by phone callers who insulted them and accused them of sexual immorality and of being agents for Western vices. Their husbands who allowed them to drive their cars were not spared either, they were condemned as pimps.

In his book, *Riyadh-November 90*, Al-Dusari skilfully recounts this event in its minute details. A very important element, which he portrays in all its authenticity, is the campaign of slander that followed the demonstration. Stories were created to libel these women as in the following quote from a supposed eyewitness:

When armed police officers surrounded them, they got out of their cars and raised their hands. One of them tore off her Abaya and trampled on it. Another girl was talking to an American photographer who was filming the demonstration. Her long hair was falling loose onto her dress, which was tight fitting and open up to the knee. She said: 'We want to be free'. Then she raised her hand with a sign of victory. After that, the police officer put his hand over the photographer's camera and then pushed him away. (Al-Dusari 2011: 103)

Al-Dusari explains how the whole event was not seen in its socio-political dimension as much as people were keen on naming and shaming the women drivers. In an honour-based culture such as that of Saudi Arabia, what seemed to bother people the most is the reputation and honour of the activists and the shame they brought on their families and their nation. What this indicates is the huge gap between the Middle class and its aspirations for change and the conservatives' fear of change. It also demonstrates the lack of a political understanding of these women's aspirations amongst the masses. Al-Manea and Al-Shaykh describe the reactions of Saudi society to their protest and

their suffering as the ultimate result of the lies and accusations weaved against them, which led to threats made against them and their family members. Al-Shaykh explains how, while her husband supported her activism, she was worried about the reaction of her conservative father:

My husband understood my situation unlike my family members, but the difficulty was how to tell my father. The first meeting with him was very hard. I did not know what his reaction would be. Would he understand my participation in the women driving that day? Would he be able to put up with the social pressure? Alternatively, would he reject what I did? (Al-Manea and Al-Shaykh, 217)

Despite such reactions, the 47 women who led the demonstration entered the books of history as the precursors of the Saudi women's movement and the brave women who have had the audacity to unsettle a super patriarchal deadlock. On the 15th anniversary of the original demonstration, Al-Manea explains that: 'It was never about driving ... Driving is just a symbol. ... It is about female empowerment and mobility. Women need incomes, they need jobs, and they need a means to get to those jobs' (Ambah 2005).

Al-Manea's statement reflects the changing economic scene in Saudi Arabia; because of the drop in oil revenues in the 1990s, the country entered a period of austerity, which did not allow citizens to enjoy the same levels of wealth they had known in the previous decades. These economic changes rendered the prevailing patriarchal diktats of gender segregation and control hardly sustainable and the conservative tropes on guarding and providing for women grew less accepted. Furthermore, the political scene resulting from the 9/11 attacks, followed by acts of domestic terrorism on Saudi soil, gave rise to major structural changes with important implications for Saudi women's activism. Their plight has been continued by other women who took over the campaign to drive and continued to militate for their freedom of mobility not only as a human right but as a socio-economic necessity. Women continued to voice their demands for change and congregate to reinforce their activism in the cyber space as an alternative sphere away from the intimidations of the religious police who have never ceased their campaign to obfuscate women's plight for freedom of movement through the lifting of the driving ban. While women incessantly continued to challenge the ban in the real world and then post their videos online, the mutawwi'in doubled in ferocity arresting every woman they saw behind the wheel. In a synchronised effort to put pressure on the monarchy to lift the ban, scores of women have driven cars in 2011, with many of them being arrested and taken to court. Manal al-Sharif, who was imprisoned on 21 May 2011 for nine days, told the BBC 'We won't stop until the first Saudi license is issued to a woman' (Buchanan 2011). Her imprisonment not only drew support from fellow Saudi women and men, but also drew world attention to the plight of Saudi women. Upon her release, she was thrilled to receive numerous messages from other women who told her how her arrest made them feel empowered and more determined to fight for their rights. She was also surprised by the coverage and support she received from across the globe as well as the intervention of Amnesty International who urged Saudi authorities to stop treating women as second-class citizens.

Other important factors that bolstered Saudi women's activism in 2011 are the so-called Arab Spring uprisings, and the reforms launched by King Abdullah who

announced his will to give women the same opportunities for political participation as their male counterparts.

On 23 September 2013, more than 1,100 Saudi activists, men and women, petitioned the King to lift the ban on women's driving. The petition, submitted on Saudi Arabia's National Day, is the brainchild of four activists, namely, Fawzia al-Ayouni, Wajiha al-Huwaider, Ibtihal Mubarak, and Haifa Usra, who established the 'Women2Drive' campaign online.

This petition marks the second major effort by women to break the ban on driving. Seriously alarmed by this move, Kamal Subhi, a well-known conservative academic, presented a report to the consultative council asking its members to drop plans to reconsider the ban. He warned that letting women to drive would increase prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, and divorce. This time, however, the conservative voice started to wane, and the consultative council which now comprised 30 women members who were appointed by the King in 2013 went ahead and discussed the request.

Having followed closely the work of these women, I can affirm that they are not mere 'cosmetic female representation' in the council, but active women who have their human rights at heart. They are intelligent, outspoken, highly motivated, and mostly determined to secure more rights for Saudi women. Their appointment to the consultative council not only changed the landscape of the Saudi political field, but they cultivated it to reap more rights for women. On 12 December 2015, women obtained their suffrage rights and participated in municipal council elections, with women voting and running as candidates for the first time in Saudi history (Doajji 2017: 6).

A year later, they launched the 'I Am My Own Guardian' campaign online, as the ultimate move to end all forms of dependency on men as legal guardians of women.

Male guardianship

Under the protocol of male guardianship, Saudi women of all ages are required to receive permission from a legal male guardian to make a variety of decisions. Women cannot study, work, or travel without the permission of a male guardian, and men can forbid their wives from continuing to work, and they can unilaterally divorce them, as they can take subsequent wives without the consent of the first wife.

Such tropes reflect the fundamental ideology of the guardianship system, which in reality is the ownership of the female body that is jealously guarded through strict veiling enforced by an unmatched segregated gender system that severely sanctions all attempts at mixed gender intermingling. Yet guardianship is not solely the protection of women from 'preying' outsiders but a pervasive legal system of male authority, which requires male consent for women to undertake fundamental activities such as marriage, access to health care, work, study, and travel. According to Doajji 'Other restrictive laws exist as derivative rules of this guardianship system, such as the ban on women's driving or institutional obstacles to women's decision making regarding their children's schooling, health, travel, and the like' (Doajji 2017: 8).

It is also a means to control women's goods and property since they are not permitted to carry out any commercial or legal transactions without the consent of their male guardians. According to Human Rights Watch (2016: 1-2), 'men use the authority that

the male guardianship system grants them to extort female dependents. Guardians have conditioned their consent for women to work or to travel on her paying him large sums of money'. In brief, women, their bodies, and their possessions, which include their inheritance and earnings, are the property of their guardians from birth to death since a chain of guardians are lined up to 'take care' of them starting from the father, to the husband, male relatives, and even their own sons.

It has to be highlighted, however, that Saudi women's experiences of guardianship restrictions vary widely based on a range of factors such as socioeconomic status, education level, and place of residence. A 40-year-old businesswoman told Human Rights Watch (2016: 16), 'women's experience with guardianship is closely related to social class ... Wealthier families, including male guardians, tend to be more open to women working and traveling'. She nevertheless insisted that she would prefer not to have a guardian at all than rely on the latter's goodwill.

In contrast, families in lower socio-economic classes who are generally more conservative could no longer afford to adhere to the restrictions imposed by their own conservative values, especially that of hiring drivers for women's needs when at the same time they support the ban on women driving cars as a means to control their mobility and stifle their actions.

In July 2016, leading Saudi women activists formally launched the 'I Am My Own Guardian' campaign via a hashtag and media outreach to end the guardianship system. They demanded legal representation from the state, in the form of full citizenship and governmental responsiveness to their demands as citizens. Along with this, they also called for social recognition and economic redistribution.

The campaign has both reflected and exploited the current political climate in the form of the state's new 'decisive' nationalism and its 2030 Vision plan, which emphasised women's economic participation. Although the campaign was criticised and deemed unpatriotic with many of its activists ending up in jail, the government issued an order on 17 April 2017 to end the requirement for a male guardian's approval for women to access government services. In August 2019, a set of decrees permitted Saudi women to travel abroad without the permission of their guardians. The decrees also allowed women to obtain family documents and guardianship over minors and to register births, marriages, and divorces.

Although this combination of government reform and repression of women activists confuses Saudi women rights militants as well as international opinion, considering the well-anchored conservative aspect of Saudi society and the place that the monarchy has to always occupy in this environment, change can only be granted by the monarch and not obtained as a result of feminist activism.

All the same, women have indeed gained in feminist political awareness and against the fortress of conservative ideology, they have reaped important human rights achievements.

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