

Dynamics of Gender Equality for Women in the Middle East: An Examination of Cultural Psychology and Islamic Jurisprudence

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Saudi Women, Gender Equality, Gender Equality in Islam, Rights of Saudi Women

Received : 3 October

Revised : 7 November

Accepted: 17 December

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ABSTRACT

Society frequently perceives women as vulnerable and subordinate to regulations. In the traditional environment of Saudi Arabia, women experience restricted mobility and social engagement. The notable distinction from other nations is in the enforcement of regulations and cultural practices that discriminate based on gender and uphold male guardianship laws. Consequently, the cultural environment is perceived as hostile towards women. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's global reputation on gender equality is very negative. Saudi Arabia seems to have misunderstood perspectives on women's human rights in its policy-making. The interpretation of the Koran and hadith must be scrutinized if it is unjust to women. Saudi ladies are beginning to perceive a promising future for him. Crown Prince Muhammad exerted significant efforts to implement substantial reforms. Diverse reforms, including gender equality, were implemented to portray a moderate and amicable Islam. Saudi women have transformed their societal presence, beginning to embrace their rights and responsibilities in the public domain

INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia enforces stringent laws, integrating Islamic doctrines into governmental policy. Islamic regulations are highly restrictive; Islamic jurisprudence serves as the foundation of state law. The Saudi legal system derives from the Koran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad, understood religiously and implemented inside an absolute monarchy (Harb, C., 2015). Religious law is deeply embedded in Saudi Arabia. The principles of Islam permeate his daily practice. The notable distinction compared to other nations is in the legal and cultural disparities in gender treatment. Women in Saudi Arabia participate in exclusive educational institutions, and utilize banks and shopping areas that are segregated from males. Women experience constraints in free contact relative to males (Budhwar et al., 2010).

The social control exerted on women is far larger than that on males (Budhwar et al., 2010). Nevertheless, it is challenging to adhere to established regulations that must be followed. Policies may be perceived as unfavorable to women, leading some to feel disadvantaged and perhaps oppressed. In recent decades, the cultural atmosphere has been perceived as stringent and inviolable. Saudi Arabia's global reputation on gender equality is very negative (Ulrichsen, 2019). The restricted access of Saudi women to public spaces compels them to seek opportunities overseas. Saudi women studying in America acknowledge that they have heightened independence, freedom, and mobility by leaving their residences alone and driving their own vehicles (Lefdahl-Davis, 2015).

Crown Prince Muhammad exerted significant efforts to implement substantial reforms. Numerous reforms, especially those pertaining to gender equality, were implemented to portray a moderate and amicable Islam. The advancements achieved by the Crown Prince are intrinsically linked to the initiation of Vision 2030 for the future development of Saudi Arabia (Izad, 2019). Particularly recent policies against Saudi women. The policy modifications for women encompass: the announcement on June 24, 2018, regarding the repeal of the driving ban; the authorization to attend football matches in stadiums since January 12, 2018; the provision allowing women over 21 to travel abroad without male guardian consent; the permission to reside alone in hotels since October 6, 2019; and the allowance for women to enlist as soldiers since October 9, 2019 (Dewi, 2019). The rights and duties of women have been a contentious topic between conservative and progressive factions in Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, there is a paucity of scholarship examining Saudi women (Mustafa, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women of Saudi Arabia

A majority of Arab women encounter discrimination and face limitations on their freedoms and rights. Certain rituals stem from religious convictions, while others are culturally imposed and rooted in tradition (Nazir, S., 2005). This scenario is regrettable since it stems from the influence of pre-Islamic rule. It may be demonstrated that, since pre-Islamic times, women's social status was neither respected nor liberated. Women are unable to have an autonomous role in the social, economic, and political spheres. Moreover, the marital situation of women during that period appeared unfavorable, as they were compelled to share their

husbands with over twelve wives. Indeed, it exacerbates a woman's predicament as she is perceived as a liability in life (Ashghar, 2000).

Saudi women are likewise affected by the firmly entrenched cultural norms inside society. Historically, the primary function of women in Saudi society was that of homemakers. Schools for females had not been founded till the 1960s. A societal issue emerges, specifically that men marry educated foreign women while Arab women stay unmarried (AlMunajjed, 1997). Following the 1960s, institutions that implemented gender segregation progressively emerged (Jerichow, 1998).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is recognized as the most conservative nation. The pursuit of gender equality has led to the establishment of educational institutions for women; nonetheless, gender segregation remains maintained. Religious education addresses gender in a distinct manner. The rationale stems from the distinct duties assigned to men and women in Saudi Arabian society: males are conventionally instructed in male pursuits, while ladies are educated about their responsibilities as mothers and homemakers (Baki, 2004). The segregation of men and women is a prevailing principle that influences nearly all facets of public and social life. Education, banking, public transit access, and career prospects remain entrenched in longstanding cultural attitudes that prohibit gender mixing (AlMunajjed, 1997). This is intrinsically linked to the Wahhabi perspective about gender segregation, which posits that the mingling of sexes may result in seduction and subsequent criminal repercussions (Baki, 2004; Imaningsih et al., 2022).

Interactions between men and women are rigorously regulated to maintain control or to mitigate undesirable behavior in women (Sacarellos, et al., 2016). Restaurants include family eating areas designated for ladies, while hospitals provide separate waiting rooms for women. In Jeddah, there exist shopping complexes exclusively for women, and some businesses have locked doors marked "For Ladies Only." The bus is partitioned into two parts to provide a distinct seating space for ladies. The bank operates specialized branches for women. The Riyadh zoo allocates three days for ladies and three days for males (AlMunajjed, 1997). The religious police, referred to as "mutaween" or "hay'a," will patrol the streets to "enjoin what is right and prohibit what is wrong" by enforcing clothing restrictions, gender segregation, and other sharia-compliant regulations. Islam. Currently, the mutaween continue to patrol; however, they are prohibited from pursuing suspects or effectuating arrests. The government undertakes the responsibility of fostering virtue and deterring crime in a more compassionate and humane manner (Zorthian, 2016).

Saudi women are perceived globally as oppressed and discriminated against within their own nation (Lefdahl-Davis, 2015; Khalid, 2018). The male guardianship system mandates that a woman is prohibited from engaging in politics, pursuing education, securing employment, or traveling without the consent of her male guardian. Male guardians include dads, siblings, grandfathers, spouses, or sons (Tønnessen, 2016). The male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia has been condemned for lacking an Islamic foundation and is a primary contributor to numerous breaches of Saudi women's human rights

(Khalid, 2018). For instance, women require their guardian's consent for professional endeavors, including travel and the execution of job contracts (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

Gender inequality is ingrained in Saudi society, where women are conditioned from a young age to accept that they possess less rights than males and are expected to conform to that "role" (Syed, et al., 2018). Numerous contemporary efforts by Saudi women advocate for the emancipation of their rights (Zyadhin, 2020). Some have emphasized that guardianship does not liberate the rights of Saudi women. The hashtag #EndMaleGuardianship on Twitter articulates Saudi women's aspiration for liberation from guardianship (Thorsen, 2019). Saudi women are progressively undergoing transformations, given the profoundly tragic pre-Islamic history that marginalized their status. In recent years, new policies have been progressively implemented. Since the Crown Prince's announcement of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016, Saudi society has seen remarkable transformations. Saudi women, hitherto restricted to the private domain and deemed "invisible," have now become "visible" contributors in the public realm (Eum, I., 2019). The World Bank (2020) in its study "Women, Business and the Law 2020" designated Saudi Arabia as the most progressive nation for women's workplace rights.

Gender Equality in Islam

Societal perceptions of women are founded on sexism, stereotypes, and adverse representations. This comprehension is bolstered by a robust grasp of religious theology asserting that males possess higher superiority as leaders (Ramadhan, 2020). Simultaneously, as per M. According to Quraish Shihab (1993), the perception of women's inferior status relative to males stems from superficial religious knowledge and misreading of sacred scriptures. Consequently, it is not unusual for Islam to be employed as a foundation for both justifiable and unjustified objectives. Islam really honors women and regards them with high esteem (Ramadhan, 2020; Saratian et al., 2022).

The Koran was revealed to Arab civilization, which traditionally positioned women in a submissive and vulnerable status (Muhammad, 2004). In this socio-cultural context, the Koran serves to address reality. Women's cases illustrate the significant neglect of women's rights by society, despite the severe terminology of oppression or tyranny (Ramadhan, 2020). A civilization characterized by stereotypical attitudes fosters stereotypical perceptions. This is evident in the interpretation and comprehension of the Al-Quran and hadith, which rely only on the text and substantiate the rationale for the superior hierarchical status of males (Khalid, 2018).

The teachings of the Al-Quran offer insights into reality, particularly when current traditions diverge from humanitarian values; also, the Al-Quran advocates for humanity, equality, and justice (Muhammad, 2004; Ramli et al., 2019; Soelton et al., 2022; Saratian et al., 2024). Human-made laws, such as those that discriminate against women, lack justification, whereas laws must align with divine principles (Hasyim, 1999).

The ideas of justice in religion are generally applicable. The Koran asserts that justice is applicable to both believers and non-believers. Justice in Islam is a fundamental theological ideal that underpins individual, societal, public, and humanitarian connections (Muhammad, 2004; Sihombing et al., 2019; Putro et al., 2024). Consequently, fairness must be maintained in the interactions between men and women, reflecting evolving conditions, as women possess the same human rights as men (Ramadhan, 2020).

Women possess independent rights that are distinct from those of males. Umar bin Khattab remarked, "During the era of ignorance, we disregarded women. With the advent of Islam and God's designation of their status, we recognized their rights over us." This statement elucidates the Koran's objective of implementing a gradual and evolutionary cultural transformation (Muhammad, 2004). Moreover, several verses from the Koran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW advocate for the formation of a just social order and the equitable positioning of individuals, applicable not only to Arab society but to humanity universally. at any moment (Muhammad, 2004). Therefore, women should not be undervalued. Any reading of the Koran that leads to oppression and injustice warrants re-evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

The author's technique is a literature study, which is a research strategy centered on the collection and analysis of data from textual sources or documents. This study entails a methodical approach to locating, assessing, and integrating pertinent material from current literature to address a research topic or evaluate a specific hypothesis. This methodology use techniques such as content analysis, literature reviews, and comparative studies to discern patterns, themes, and viewpoints from the examined texts. This methodology is advantageous for acquiring a comprehensive understanding of a specific subject without the necessity of gathering primary data, making it appropriate for disciplines where empirical data is challenging to procure or when researchers aim to establish a robust theoretical framework prior to undertaking additional research.

Deliberation

The adoption of sharia law significantly restricts women's rights. In 2016, Saudi Arabia was positioned 141st out of 144 nations for gender equality, as per the 2016 Global Gender Gap Report statistics. For decades, Saudi Arabia has faced significant global criticism for its stringent regulations on women. The enforcement of gender segregation, guardianship, and the prevalence of sexual abuse contributes to the subjugation of women. Alhejji et al. (2018) discovered that the presence of deficiencies in formal institutions and informal authority correlates with initiatives aimed at women's equality. Formal institutions, including legislation and local regulations, have facilitated gender equality, but informal factors grounded in cultural norms and traditions significantly impede these initiatives.

Indeed, Saudi women are capable of participating and advancing in the public domain. However, a woman's status is complex when she is subjected to male authority due to well entrenched cultural norms. Conversely, literary studies critique this circumstance, in contrast to the status of women in the Holy Book (Al-Quran), which provides opportunities that empower women, including their freedom to make autonomous judgments regarding societal matters (Al Alhareth, et al., 2015).

RESEARCH RESULT

Below are several advancements in the rights of women in Saudi Arabia:

1. Rights to education

Islamic law fundamentally ensures equal chances for both men and women to pursue education. Education in Saudi Arabia presents restricted opportunities for women and has not been equitably accessed by them (Alhejji, et al., 2018). A significant impediment for Saudi women in their pursuit of education is the institution of male guardianship. A Saudi woman's aspiration to pursue education is wholly contingent upon the choice of her male guardian. A further impediment hindering Saudi women from obtaining an education is the stipulation that they must marry to be eligible for scholarships for overseas study, hence necessitating the presence of a 'guardian' throughout their educational pursuits (Khalid, 2016).

Arab women face educational constraints. For Saudi Arabia to effectively address global concerns, prioritizing women's education across all disciplines is essential. In the conservative society of Saudi Arabia, the position of women in education serves not just as an instrument for social change, but also acts as a mechanism for conservation (Hamdan, 2005). Subsequently, following the Crown Prince's announcement of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016, a policy was implemented to abolish guardianship for women over 21, enabling them to pursue studies abroad without the necessity of a guardian's accompaniment.

2. Right to Work

Similar to Saudi women's right to education, their right to employment encounters comparable challenges. Initially, the necessity for consent from a male guardian, followed by limitations on mobility stemming from reliance on male coworkers (Khalid, 2016). Despite the absence of legal codification, both organizations and people generally adhere to this guardianship system, indicating that women require their guardian's consent for professional endeavors, including travel and the execution of job contracts. Socially conservative norms and traditions impede women's work participation, obstruct equitable pay, and hinder professional advancement chances (Al-Asfour et al., 2017).

The results from Al-Asfour et al. Al. (2017) delineate the multifaceted pressures affecting Saudi women in both domestic and professional spheres, encompassing restricted employment and career progression prospects, overwhelming workloads due to inadequate work-family equilibrium, obstacles associated with pregnancy and mobility, absence of equality, and gender discrimination within the workplace.

To augment the overall employment of Saudis, Vision 2030 is implementing targeted initiatives to elevate the proportion of women in the workforce. Mohammad bin Salman has requested many public sector institutions to advertise employment opportunities specifically for women (Hvidt, 2018). The World Bank (2020), in its study "Women, Business and the Law 2020," designated Saudi Arabia as the most progressive nation for women's rights in the workplace.

3. Political Rights

The Saudi regime has a longstanding history of exacerbating political conditions for women. Women lack the right to vote. In 2005, women were barred from voting and candidacy. Since 2015, women have been permitted to engage in municipal elections and possess the ability to join deliberative bodies (Khalid, 2016).

4. Entitlements to Equal Treatment Under the Law

Saudi guardianship rules do not provide comprehensive authority over all women's activities and decisions about their life. Similarly, in the legal domain, it appears that matters concerning minor women need the consent of a male guardian for any legal reports to be acquired (Khalid, 2016). According to reports about Vision 2030, the crown prince will ease guardianship regulations. Nevertheless, the author has not identified any material pertaining to its applicability in women's legal rights. Guardianship concessions target women over 21 years of age concerning travel permissions, educational permits, passport permits, and marriage permits (Dewi, 2019).

5. Rights of Mobility

Prior to the repeal of the ban on June 24, 2018, Saudi Arabia was the sole nation globally that forbade women from operating motor vehicles. This stringent restriction arises from the patriarchal traditions and traditional culture of Saudi society, which establishes societal conventions that restrict their rights. Women's rights and liberties in nearly all facets of their existence. One of these conventions is the prohibition against women driving. This norm is founded on two entrenched social institutions inside Saudi society: the guardianship system and gender segregation (Eum, I., 2019).

Currently, several legislative advancements benefiting women are inextricably linked to the diligent efforts of the crown prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Muhammad bin Salman executed a strategic maneuver, leading to his father's appointment of him as the director of the government body responsible for the formulation of the Vision 2030 development plan. A minimum of 543 distinct reform initiatives were delineated in the 2016-2020 National Transformation Plan for reform execution. Mohammad bin Salman, the youthful crown prince of Saudi Arabia, is fervently advancing the reform initiative he launched in 2017 with the Vision 2030 reform agenda (Hvidt, M. 2018).

A study underscores the influence of the male guardianship system and gender inequality on the pursuit of gender equality in Saudi Arabia. The findings illustrate how the interplay of factors at the macro, meso, and micro levels (societal, organizational, and individual) affects equal chances (gender equality) for women in Saudi Arabia (Syed et al., 2018). Alhejji et al. (2018) emphasize that while there exists some evidence of formal legal and policy support for gender

equality, the informal influence of cultural norms and traditions obstructs these initiatives. Women's active participation impacts macro and meso-level issues, while at the individual level, they demonstrate agency in advancing gender equality (Syed, et al., 2018).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), recognized as the most conservative nation governed by sharia law. Nonetheless, the male guardianship system in Saudi Arabia lacks an Islamic foundation. The treatment of women in Saudi Arabia is purportedly governed by Islamic regulations that must be adhered to. Policies are perceived as unfavorable to women, leading some to feel disadvantaged and maybe coerced. Saudi Arabia seems to have misconstrued perspectives on women's human rights in its policymaking concerning women. The interpretation of the Koran and hadith must be scrutinized if it is unjust to women. Islamic teachings advocate for the respect of women. The verses of the Al-Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad SAW facilitate the formation of a just social order and promote the equality of all individuals.

The culture of women in a nation is shaped by governmental frameworks and societal conventions that develop within the community. Cultural values and traditions dictate the position of women in Saudi Arabia and affect gender equality. The active participation of women is a significant factor that can promote cultural transformation. The Saudi Arabian government's determination to implement new policies includes a focus on women as agents of change. Significant alterations in governmental policies are giving rise to a new representation of Arab women's culture. The government is beginning to incorporate gender equality in Islam by adjusting to global problems. The active participation of women is essential for Saudi women to attain visibility in the public domain. Historical traditions are not wholly suitable for the swiftly evolving circumstances and problems of the present day.

Recommendation

Theoretical Aspect

Theoretically, a more progressive approach to interpreting religious texts, particularly the Quran and Hadith, must be developed to create a fair framework for women. This includes reinterpretations that emphasize justice and gender equality as mandated in Islam. Additionally, cross-cultural research comparing the application of these values in various countries can identify best practices that Saudi Arabia can adopt. Furthermore, Islamic educational curricula should be strengthened by incorporating more comprehensive studies on gender equality to reduce stereotypes and discrimination from an early age.

Practical Aspect

Practically, several measures can be implemented to empower women in society. Women's access to education should be facilitated without barriers, such as the male guardian requirement for advanced studies, including studying abroad. In the workplace, inclusive environments should be created with flexible working policies, childcare facilities, and leadership training for women. Public

awareness programs aimed at transforming societal perceptions of women's roles can also help diminish the social stigma that has traditionally restricted women's active participation in various areas of life.

Policy Aspect

From a policy perspective, reforms focusing on eliminating or restricting the male guardianship system are urgently needed to grant women the freedom to make critical decisions, such as traveling, marrying, or working, independently. Moreover, stronger legal protections must be enforced to safeguard women against workplace discrimination, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. The government should establish independent monitoring bodies to oversee the implementation of gender equality policies and evaluate their impact. These measures should be complemented by efforts to increase women's participation in politics, providing greater access to decision-making roles and supporting comprehensive societal transformation.

FURTHER STUDY

To expand research on gender equality for women in Saudi Arabia, several critical areas merit exploration. A comparative analysis of Saudi Arabia's gender reforms with those of culturally similar nations could highlight effective strategies and reveal persisting challenges in achieving equality. Investigating grassroots perceptions of reform is essential, particularly through qualitative studies that capture the experiences of women in both rural and urban settings. Economic studies examining the relationship between female workforce participation and national economic growth within the framework of Vision 2030 would provide valuable insights. Additionally, exploring progressive Islamic legal interpretations that promote gender justice may influence the reformation of existing laws, especially those surrounding guardianship. Educational advancements post-Vision 2030 warrant an assessment to understand how increased access translates into professional empowerment and leadership roles for women. Further, examining societal resistance to gender equality reforms could uncover the dynamics of cultural transformation, shedding light on the balance between tradition and modernity. The role of social media in advocacy, such as campaigns like #EndMaleGuardianship, deserves attention to understand its influence on public opinion and policy-making. Health and psychological well-being studies are also vital, focusing on how evolving gender norms impact mental health and family dynamics. Finally, investigating pathways to greater political representation for Saudi women, including policies and initiatives promoting governance roles, could reveal strategies for enhanced participation and leadership. Together, these studies would offer comprehensive insights into the multi-dimensional journey toward gender equality in Saudi Arabia.

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