

Arab spring, women's rights and the kingdom of saudi arabia



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Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Towards the end of 2010, the whole world saw the rising of The Arab Spring whose effects is spreading all over the Arab world in different countries.

Since then several Arab countries have experienced uprisings and fights for human rights that have achieved success although some have experienced devastating results such as death. Some of the countries where the spring has achieved success include Tunisia, Egypt and Libya where eviction of strict unfair rulers and dictators from power took place (Ajami 2012). This has stirred similar reactions in countries such as Syria where the conditions continue to unfold. Saudi Arabia, the focus of this paper is no exemption from the effect. People have begun to fight for their rights especially women who live under strict rules. Saudi Arabia is such a strict kingdom enshrined in Sharia law that it has religious police that ensure that women dress properly according to religion and denying them any freedom. This paper discusses the effect of the Arab Spring on the rights of women in Saudi Arabia that ranked 130 out of 132 in 2009 in a Global Gender Gap Index.

Currently, winds of change are sweeping through Saudi Arabia where some changes are taking place, although in an incremental way. The Gender Gap Report examined 135 countries, which make up over 90% of the total world's population. The report focused on several issues that include economic participation and opportunity, educational achievement or attainment, health and survival and political empowerment of women in these countries. Economic participation and opportunity covered the equality of wage, female labour force participation in important positions as well as number of women

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within the decision-making positions. Educational attainment focused on the literacy of women as well as number of women enrolled in institutions of higher learning. Health and survival rates compare the gender mortality rate as well as life expectancy. Finally, political empowerment examines the number of women in public political leadership positions such as head of states over the last 50 years. Ranking in the last five in the list only implies that Saudi Arabia is among the top five countries where the lives of women are quite poor or male dominance is quite high, hardly recognizing women as an equal counterpart in anything.

Therefore, women of Saudi Arabia have a lot to fight for in terms of their rights compared to other countries in the study and worldwide. Cultural Barriers Enshrined in the Society and Saudi Sharia Law The fight to equality in Saudi Arabia is not going to be an easy or smooth path. Although the Islamic religion treats both genders equally, Islamic scholars in Saudi Arabia for centuries have interpreted the Quran and the Al-Sunna in quite a conservative way.

Their definition of women rights are quite confusing, and just an amalgamation of undefined laws with outdated customs and extreme traditions that give women hardly any freedom. With strict following of the laws of the country established in the interpretation of the Quran, it is hard for women to have any rights since they have to follow the strict rules, enforced by religious police. Such rules as well as cultural roles placed on women by the religious laws are quite conservative denying women any freedom.

Saudi women make up around 50% of the population but only a minimal part of the economic participation. To prosper further, Saudi requires empowerment of women in order for them to participate in economic development. However, the conservative interpretation of the Quran continues to pose a great barrier to Saudi women. The law and society greatly segregate women by offering them little power or no authority compared with men.

With such barriers, the fight to freedom for women in Saudi Arabia cannot be easy. However, this has not deterred Saudi women from fighting for their rights, which is been triggered by the Arab Spring and other events all over the world. Part I – Beginning of the Arab Spring The tumultuous changes that are occurring in the Arab world started in December 2010. A young market vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set fire to himself to protest the confiscation of the fruit and vegetables that he was selling from his stall. He was a Tunisian man who burned himself in protest at his treatment at the hands of a female police officer. The horrific death began a series of protests that spread across the countries of the Middle East. Under-employed young people all over the Middle East rioted.

They wanted change. They wanted some choice in their political system and an opportunity to earn gainful employment. The influences of the Arab Spring moved implacably across the countries of the Middle East. The government in Egypt fell, and people rioted in Libya and overthrew Gaddafi, their dictator. The rebels in Syria are now suffering because of their struggles that began during their Arab Spring. Historical treatment of Women in Saudi

Arabia is different than other Middle Eastern countries. However, this is <https://assignbuster.com/arab-spring-womens-rights-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>

currently changing although they are not yet free to make their own decision in some of the activities concerning their life.

Currently women are studying and practicing law. The reason for a different treatment of women in Saudi Arabia is that the religion demands protection and safety of women. When restricted to do some of the things allowable to men, it is because of protecting them from harm and keeping them safe.

Part II – The Future The issues that Saudi women are fighting for have attracted international attention. People are realizing the issues that Saudi women have to overcome if they are going to achieve equality. Top diplomats from around the world are making comment. The United States Government's last Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and one of the European Union's top leaders, Catherine Ashton, have both commented on the situation. Even female members of the Saudi royal family are becoming involved in the issue of women's rights. Saudi women inspired by the Arab Spring pursue their own dreams of freedom. There have been some surprising changes since the Arab Spring.

In September 2011, in an astonishing move, the King of Saudi Arabia gave women the right to vote. They will be able to not only vote, but also hold office. Women will be allowed to vote and stand as candidates in municipal elections, but not until the 2013 elections.

The King is trying to balance the demands of the conservative clerics with the demands of a modern world. The last two years in the Middle East have demonstrated how quickly well-established leaders can be ousted by a nation galvanized by the need to obtain their democratic rights. The Saudi <https://assignbuster.com/arab-spring-womens-rights-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>

King has to balance all of the competing political agendas. He has to consider his allies in the West that have helped bring great wealth and modernization to his country while at the same time considering the conservative sectors of the population, Saudi Arabian conservatives interpret women's rights in a manner that is more restrictive than any other country in the Middle East. The king has to think of the young people in his country, men and women, who are the future of Saudi Arabia. The centuries old traditions of Saudi Arabia will not change overnight, but the Arab Spring is making it very difficult for the Saudi Arabian establishment to continue denying women's basic rights. Under the influence of the Arab Spring, the position of the average Saudi woman in Saudi Arabia is undergoing great changes characterized by challenges and religious resistance from the clerics.

The image of these women that is depicted in the media does not provide a realistic picture of Saudi women. Images of women covered in black from head to toe without legal rights no longer represent Saudi women. This representation of Saudi women is changing because of a sincere desire for reform from the Saudi women themselves. The Saudi people need to accept a few changes within their society in order to correct the misunderstood image of Saudi women. Change can begin by trying to understand the correct Islamic teachings and making efforts to distinguish the difference between ancient tribal customs and traditions that have been handed down over the years and the words of God and his Prophet Mohammad.

There are many news stories of Saudi women being successful in multiple fields. Saudi women are getting involved in education, the social services, <https://assignbuster.com/arab-spring-womens-rights-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>

business, media, and health. These stories of success make other Saudi women feel that they can be successful as well.

In addition, raising the level of awareness of education is the key for any nation's development. Saudi women are succeeding because of education. They are entering universities and earning high-level degrees that allow them to compete on equal basis with people from all over the world. People at all levels of the society have come up in an effort to confront abuse of women. For a long time the greatest threat and challenge to the Islam society as well as the religion has been wrong interpretation of the tenets of Islam and old cultural taboos as religious activities. It is essential that women understand they do have a choice, and suffering in hands of men would only be out of their own will by refraining from speaking or by remaining silent. Attitude towards women by the men need to change especially for those who think women are inferior and a weaker gender.

The truth is that they are equal and each can achieve what the other can. All people including religious scholars, politician, instructors and influential people within the society need to condemn mistreatment or abuse of women openly if success is to be achieved. Women alone cannot make the necessary change to influence the whole kingdom to change their attitudes towards women. Media as well plays the biggest role of enlightening people. Therefore, imperative in this battle considering it has the greatest influence within any society. It should be at the forefront in condemning self-centered men who mistreat women as well as exposing them. The “ New Arab Spring” continues to inspire many people all over Saudi Arabia to voice their support for women.

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Through social media and better coverage, people in other countries have learnt they can fight for their rights as well. The impact of the spring can be seen in Saudi Arabia considering two demonstrations occurred, one in the capital Riyadh and the other in the religious center of Islam, Mecca. This achieved some success considering that the King appointed women in the country's advisory council, which had never happened before. It is clear that men and women are uniting towards advocating for equal rights for all, and progress is evident.

Encouraged by the events of the Arab spring, women in Saudi Arabia are becoming more aggressive about pursuing their rights. They have organized high-profile activities that are encouraging the reformists in the royal family to make changes. Women are making their presence known on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. They are using social media to make their voices heard to the rest of the world. They have organized driving campaigns where they actually drive – women cannot drive in Saudi Arabia even though there is no written law barring them from driving. Ever since King Abdullah ascended the throne in 2005, he has been trying to keep the ultraconservative majority in Saudi Arabia happy while granting women more rights.

He is trying to keep those ultraconservative Saudi Arabian clerics quiet. They are the ones who oppose giving women the right to drive, work or go to school. The Arab Spring has brought about huge changes in the role of women in the Middle East. In Tunis, women have fought for and won a new electoral code guaranteeing that women will make up half of candidates'

lists for offices. In Egypt, women have demanded they be appointed to half of the ministerial posts.

In Saudi Arabia, women still have longer way of struggle to get to the point where they ask for their political empowerment. They are quietly forcing a revolution in an era when Islamist movements in the Middle East are on the rise. For the first time in Saudi Arabia's history, women participated in the Summer Olympics in London.

Saudi Crown Prince Nayef said that participating in Olympic sports met the standards of "women's decency and didn't contradict Islamic laws" (Miller, 1). Reema Abdullah, a well-known Saudi woman who has launched a women's soccer team, and hosts a sports radio show was the first Saudi woman to carry an Olympic torch. Physical education is becoming a required part of the curriculum at girls' schools in Saudi Arabia.

This is a huge victory for women's health. The Saudi Ministry of Health has appointed a woman as the first assistant undersecretary. Saudi women have been agitating for the right to work for years. They have had an unemployment rate of 80%.

Since the activities of the Arab spring, King Abdullah has issued a decree allowing women to work in lingerie and cosmetics shops. This eliminated an awkward situation that forced Muslim women to consult with male clerks about their underwear size. Women can now vote and interact with some government departments without a male guardian as before (Black 2008).

Women are being appointed to positions in the Shura council. The King has made a huge contribution towards the rights of the women as well as <https://assignbuster.com/arab-spring-womens-rights-and-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia/>

demonstrating that they are equal and capable just as men in making decisions or holding decision-making positions within the society.

This is a huge step towards the rights of women since the king is the most respected and influential in the kingdom. Conclusion Change is coming to Saudi Arabia. The Arab Spring has stimulated Saudi Arabians desire to have fair, equitable, and consistent treatment of their citizens. Women, especially have been feeling the need to express themselves and demand fair treatment. They want the ability to drive, vote, and hold down jobs. They want to have the right to defend themselves against abusive husbands, and the right to have a good education and study whatever they want. The royal family, with its strong ties to the west, is a key figure in this fight for equal rights.

King Abdullah has already demonstrated his support for women and their struggle for independence, with his decisions to allow women to vote and including them in the Shura. The fight for women's rights will not be won soon, however. King Abdullah and the women who wrote The Shadow Report have a long way to go before they overcome the opposition of the conservative religious clerics. Both courts and government departments must address women's rights.

Such social issues cry out for immediate resolution. Negative attitudes toward women must be changed and old customs and traditions that discriminate against women must be rejected. Women must be allowed to attain the skills necessary to earn a living. Saudi women can do great things and compete in the open market only if they are given a chance. The

question of whether more influences of The Arab Spring will be experienced in Saudi Arabia considering it is still ongoing remains unclear. However, one thing is clear that it has had a tremendous influence towards the fight for rights of women in Saudi Arabia. Work cited Ajami, Fouad.

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