

Women involved in
the leadership of
saudi arabia
sociology essay



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This paper delves into the world of Islamic and Muslim culture and its effects on the Saudi Arabian woman in terms of education and leadership. Access to justice and the structure of the government of Saudi Arabia is used as an example of how road blocks are put in place politically for Saudi women. Economic, educational and religious leadership are discussed in-depth with ideas of how to bring social change for women to gain educational and leadership roles in Saudi Arabia. Muslim and Islamic social norms, and their impact on Saudi women, are discussed within this examination. Political leadership and the lack of women inside of the world of the Saudi government provide greater insight to this review.

Saudi Arabia is a desert country spread over 864, 000 square miles. There are no rivers or lakes. The clusters of townships are seen around a few oases and seashores. Big cities, like Riyadh, Makkah, Medina, Dhahran and Jeddah, enjoy all the amenities of well-planned modern metropolitan cities. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, headed by the Al Saud royal family, with a council of ministers. Saudi Arabia's strong roots in religious and tribal histories has made it what it has become today. By the 1970's Saudi Arabia had become a dominant in the realm of international finance and a significant political power in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has emerged as the fulcrum of the Middle East political juggernaut. This meteoric rise unleashed tremendous forces which reverberated in every aspect of life of the nation; social, economic and political. The nomadic tribes, which roamed the arid deserts, camping from oasis to oasis, struggling to survive, suddenly found themselves wallowing in wealth. Townships with modern amenities began to mushroom in the barren biblical land. The impact of the sudden

economic boom unleashed by the oil bonanza struck Saudi society like an avalanche. Initially, Saudis were baffled by the rapid socio-economic undercurrents, but soon took control of the situation and adapted themselves to the new environment, without swerving from the trodden path of Islamic tradition. Saudi Arabia is occupying the larger part of the Arabian Peninsula and is the world's leading oil producer and exporter. The kingdom is the center of the major places of importance for Muslims from all over the world. In this case, it houses two of the most holy cities of Islam: Mecca and the medina. In Mecca, approximately two million pilgrims meet every year for the annual pilgrimage. The total population for the country is approximately twenty six million people with about seventy percent of the population constituting of foreigners who work on temporary permits (Kathleen, 1991). About ten percent of the population consists of the Shi'a who are discriminated against in hiring, education and government processes the recent past, Saudi Arabia has made some progress in women's education and employment. However, " gender discrimination is built into Saudi Arabia's governmental and social structures and is integral in the country's practice and interpretation of their particular version of religious teachings" (Anders, 1998). For women, access to employment activities is very limited, with minimal enjoyment of the full benefits of citizenship or adulthood. This limitation has caused a call for change and the reformers are actively working on forming the democracy of the country. The international community is also working in close collaboration with the reformers to help in the administration of justice and the equality of gender in Saudi Arabia (Sameena, 2005).

In my study, I aim to explore the discriminative judicial and government systems in the country with the inequality in the gender treatment to describe the leadership roles of the women in the Saudi society. I will also show how the various isolation methods that Saudi women undergo hinder them from experiencing leadership roles.

Access for Justice and the Indiscrimination in the Saudi Society

The Saudi system is set up in a form known as the Sunni-Islam state version which is a conservative form of government in terms of interpretation of the Muslim faith. In the judicial and government system of the country they make use of the Islam law that is comprised of a defined gender inequality. In this case, the women are subjected to strict and tight legal instructions and there are restrictions on their personal behavior in comparison to men (Colin, 2005). There is no equality for women despite Article 8 of the Saudi law which states that, " Government in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is based on the premise of justice, consultation, and equality in accordance with the shari'ah law" (Sameena, 2005). However, the individual interpretations favor men rather than women resulting in a hierarchy system that also privileges notables and good connections over ordinary citizens and outsiders (2005). In this case, the young defer to the elder and the women have to defer to the men. This system in itself creates a biased and self-centered form of society with a poor scripture. For the outsiders, foreigners are treated differently depending on the country of origin and the race, too (Kathleen, 1991).

Women cannot act as lawyers, and for one to have access to justice she must work under a male lawyer where she is forced to offer up most of her

confidential information regarding financial and family matters to the lawyer and the judges. A single man's testimony in the court is the same as for two women (Sameena, 2005). In most cases, the women rely on their husbands and this denies the women personal justice and the ability to access power and leadership positions since one cannot experience power without justice.

The Saudi Woman and Economical Leadership

One of the major factors that has shaped the Saudi Society, is the economic situation. However, Tucker (1993) disagrees with the notion that a modern capitalist economy and its extension to almost all areas have resulted in many positive changes for women in Saudi Arabia. She argues that pre-capitalist urban occupations were already open to Saudi women of all classes, from midwifery and entertainment to holders of important real estate. Economic changes of the modern period did not improve or raise the levels of women's participation in public life. In the Saudi culture, serious life begins with marriage, which can be for many, an escape from family pressures and economic difficulty. Because males are seen as the protectors and supporters of women and are, therefore, considered indispensable, families pull all their resources together (material and emotional) to ensure that their young daughters marry appropriately.

Women of Saudi nationality are not allowed to access benefits from the government. In the case where a Saudi woman marries a non-Saudi, she then cannot pass the nationality to her children. Consequently, in 2002, women had no right to obtain the national identity card without the order from the mahram, but they appeared as nationals from the state records

that included her as a member of a particular family only (Kathleen, 1991). When this was the norm, widowed and single women had a hard time gaining leadership of their families and also in obtaining other benefits of their own and from the state subsidies (Cordesman, 2003).

Saudi women do not have the right to sign contracts or to control financial assets and in this instance, women are made to “lick the boots” of the males. As a result, women are denied the economic leadership and mainly depend on their husbands for economical support. The women cannot be integrated in the development processes and this greatly impacts them due to their reduced influence in policy making and changes in legislation (Colin, 2005).

In a way, the Saudi law is observed as assuring gender equivalence with the balance of the prescribed duties and rights for both men and women in relation to each other. Consider for example, the case where the daughters retain half as much inheritance as the sons and they are being taken care of by their husbands (Colin, 2005). Women retain property after marriage and in this case, the husbands have the right to protect the woman and hence the women have no obligation to spend their acquired wealth on the men's behalf. The married men have the full responsibility for their family needs. And in case a woman conducts herself in an immoral manner, the man of closest relation is punished on her behalf (Helen, 2007).

The role of women in Saudi Arabia is becoming more significant in both political and economic terms as more and more women hold positions of leadership and civic prominence. The educational levels of the women who

have made significant contributions on leadership hold positions as founders of organizations and range in their education: from holding bachelors, masters, and doctorate degrees. Some of these women hold voluntary positions and others hold paid positions that entail career commitments.

Special emphasis on higher education is a salient feature of Saudi educational policy. Established in 1975, the Ministry of Higher Education embarked on a long-term master plan to enable the Saudi educational system to provide the highly trained manpower necessary to run the country's increasingly sophisticated economy (General Presidency of Girls Education, (2000)). The primary objective was to establish new institutes of higher education throughout the country.

The Kingdom has given priority to quantity and quality expansion of education in the last five to seven-years development plans. Despite the low percentage of Saudi women working in the labor force in the Kingdom compared to advanced countries, it is the unavailability of working sectors open for Saudi women - usually limited to education and medicine - which has caused some saturation in these sectors. The Saudi government is planning to undertake a study of the role of women in the country's economy (The Kahleej Times, (2005)). Some of the goals expressed by Saudi Arabia's 8th Five-Year plan (2005-2009) are to enlarge the scope of economic activities available for women. One of the steps being considered to realize the goals as set forth in the Plan is to take a look at current regulations and see what needs to be done to modify or eliminate them to open the economy further to women. Other parts of the plan focus on long term policies needed to support females who want to work. The objective is to lower the

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unemployment rate for women. In keeping with this objective, the plan wants government and private organizations to provide counseling for women for whom the novelty of employment may be stressful. The Saudi Plan goes beyond employment to address the entrepreneurial and investing ambitions of the country's women. According to the Times many Saudi females have access to idle funds, which they could be using not only to provide employment for themselves—as traders—but also as an asset to the Saudi economy as a whole. Saudi Arabia is considering changing some of its restrictive policies directed at limiting the participation of women in the country's economy.

Women and the Religious Leadership

To better understand a Saudi woman's position, one must learn a great deal about the culture and religion. One should also understand Islam, its history and culture. The word Islam is an Arabic word meaning peace, submission and obedience. In a Muslim community, the people are to follow God's commands and live a moral life. Saudi women who are working and serve society should be careful to follow an Islamic way of life.

In the modern society, wearing a hijab, which may cover a woman's head or her whole body, remains part of Muslim culture in Saudi Arabia and also worldwide. Most Muslim women dress modestly and in Muslim countries even the most successful business women will cover themselves with the hijab. Many of the women welcome this practice as they feel it prevents them from being bothered by co-workers or strangers. Some modern Muslims in non-Muslims cultures, however, choose not to cover to attract less attention

rather than deal with discouragement about it. Whichever the case, the wearing of a hijab should be intended to please God and should not be done in a mandatory or pressurized manner (Cordesman, 2003).

Before Islam, in the Arab world women had no rights to own any property, inherit, divorce, or even choose their marriage partner; the father was usually the one to decide or a male relative. With the advent of Islam, women were given the aforementioned rights and their status changed to that of a dignified human being, deserving of respect and honor. The Islamic view about women is that men and women are equal in their origin and their rights. According to the history of Islam, women have political rights, can participate in public affairs, run a business, choose their husbands and even inherit properly. In regard of women's education, a woman in Islam is not required to contribute financially to the family, which may explain why some Saudis consider education to be worthwhile and necessary for males and less for women. The Quran, which is the source of Islamic jurisprudence, contains no verse that deprives woman the right to be educated. In fact, the word Quran is derived from the word 'reading' and the first quranic verse calls on the devoted to read and write. There are no barriers to women acquiring knowledge in the Islamic faith as long as there is no mixing between the two genders.

" Many Muslims believe that men and women are equal in matters of religion and education, and that every instruction given in it applies equally to male and female" (Kathleen, 1991). The role of women in the family and upbringing of children play a major part in the Muslim culture. Muslim culture takes this instruction a bit further to where the women are allowed to

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worship at home as the men and the boys worship at the mosque. As a result, despite the active role of women in religion, Saudi women are denied access to any management roles and leadership positions in the country's religious institutions (Kathleen, 1991).

A battle between culture and religion has arisen, as Islam allows women the right to education and a separate income from their spouse. And as Arab women continue to seek education and work, society's expectations hover over them, giving more strength to those who oppose such actions.

Saudi Women and the Education Sector

Education is a central aspect of family and community life. Parents are deeply involved in their children's education, and the close links between home and school serve to reinforce the structure of the community and the nation.

The education of Arab women started long ago, dating back almost 1500 years, when the wife of Prophet Muhammad, Khadija, owned her own caravan and was her own employer; a successful one at that. However, after the Prophet's death, the status of women slowly began to decline, and by the early 1900's, Arab women's status had been dwindled down to that of oppression and non-education. Because of this, several feminist women movements arose in the 1930's and 1940's, the most famous one led by Huda Sha'rawi in Egypt (Sidani, 2005). Even though these feminist movements helped encourage Arab women to get back on the rise in society, only a handful were able to achieve that, as many countries such as Saudi Arabia still held the status of women back.

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Women's education in Saudi Arabia started informally with the Kuttab schools that taught the fundamentals of Islam and the basics of writing, reading, and arithmetic. By 1945, King Abdul Aziz, the country's founder, had initiated an extensive program to establish schools in the Kingdom. Six years later, in 1951, the country had 226 schools with 29, 887 students. In 1954, the Ministry of Education was established headed by then Prince Fahd as the first Minister of Education. The first university, now known as King Saud University, was founded in Riyadh in 1957.

In 1943, the first private girl's school was established in Makkah by a group of people in the private sector who wanted to teach their daughters basic reading, writing and mathematics (Al Salloom, 1991). When public elementary education for girls began in 1960, there were only 15 school buildings, with a total of 127 classrooms and 518 female students. Public education at the intermediate and secondary levels for girls followed in 1963 with four school buildings for the intermediate level, and one for the secondary level (Al Salloom, 1991). As Saudi families started to realize that educating their daughters posed no threat to family life in the traditional role of women in society, the attitude towards females' education changed.

Female students enrolled at all educational levels and more schools were opened. From 1970 to 1990 the number of female students enrolled in higher education expanded from 400 students to 48, 000 (Ministry of planning, 1990). With the rapid expansion of educational facilities and enrollment, the numbers of Saudi females were teachers and school principals (General Presidency of Girls' education, General Administration for educational research and statistics, 1992).

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Today, Saudi Arabia's nationwide educational system comprises many universities and colleges, including thousands of primary and secondary schools. Open to every citizen, the system provides students with free education, books and health services. Although women's education was founded 40 years ago, which is not a long time when compared with other countries . the system of women's education is making progress and developing continuously.

Women in Saudi Arabia are known as the biggest part of the population. Till 10 years ago women were not accepted as a part of the working community. This demonstrates the lack of working sectors open to Saudi women, as well as the transportation issue, and people's attitude towards employed women.

Jobs available for Saudi women are very limited and are mostly in education, health, and administration. Women can work and attain jobs in any setting as long as there is no exposure to men. Because of this cultural and religious rule, women need to have their own independent social and educational organizations. Society allows women to fill top administrative positions in women's colleges in order to manage the college effectively. Women have a privileged familiarity with the issues in their education. But education for Saudi women is regarded as being of secondary importance to taking care of the household and family.

There are few jobs available for well-qualified women in Saudi Arabia. The main reason for this is that women's education did not start alongside men's education. Women's education was subject to negotiation with religious and social traditions.

In 1993, King Fahad, introduced new provisions for the Higher Education Council and the University System. The objective was to enhance the efficiency of Saudi universities by offering programs in new fields, encouraging greater cooperation among Saudi institutes of higher learning and increasing involvement of the teaching staff in the operations of facilities. Many female students study in universities that accept both male and female students and also at colleges set up exclusively for women.

To complement their studies in universities in the Kingdom, Saudi students have the opportunity to pursue graduate and post-graduate degrees in specialized fields abroad. Supported by the government scholarships, thousands of Saudi students are enrolled in universities outside the Kingdom, mainly in the United States.

The beginning of women's higher education was similar in Saudi Arabia and the United States, in that both countries, at one point, denied women access to higher education and women were considered as comparative newcomers to equity of opportunity in education. This brings light to addressing another issue involving higher education and the Saudi woman: women don't have the right to make decisions and set policies concerning their higher education. To some extent, they may manage and organize their day-to-day departments, operations and resources but all major decisions affecting them-such as hiring, planning and evaluating are still made by men. What makes this problem more complicated is the lack of communication, face to face between men who are high in administered hierarchy and women who occupy lower administrative levels.

For the graduate female students, there are minimal chances for them to advance in the job markets and this hinders the women from rising up into a leadership position in the education sector. The lucky few women in leadership positions in the education sector have intensively proposed for the subsidiary vocational education to allow for the women participation in the government agencies and employment opportunities but this falls on deaf ears (Helen, 2007).

The nature of female leadership roles and women leaders' experiences are influenced by the essential framework of the concerned social structure and its ideological basis that determines sex roles, organizational structure and practices and the power relations" and, in the broad perspective, the women are segregated and marginalized and thus they are denied the educational leadership (Anders, 1998).

As a result of information on teacher's job satisfaction and principal leadership, behavior in Saudi Arabia is limited, and it is necessary to look at research conducted in other countries for information that could help bridge the gap between preconceived notions about the Arab world and the reality of the conditions encountered by women in that part of the world.

Cultural Factors Influencing Saudi Women

The shaping of societies in general is dependent on cultural and traditional factors, as well as economic and political systems. In Saudi Arabia, society culture and traditions play a major role. Culture predominantly influences women's' roles in Muslim society, because of the emphasis placed on

women's status and acceptable behavior as outlined in the Quran. Runty
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(1981) believed that no matter what form the political system took, no matter what level of education women attained, no matter what traditional values governed employment, Saudi women would not play major leadership roles in modern day economics because cultural factors have impeded their development. There are a number of factors that have impacted the Saudi women's status and their position in society. The economy, the importance of the family unit, the educational opportunities available, the degree of encouragement women encounter in their pursuit of education and work, and the degree of urbanization attained are all important factors that shape a society and mold many of its beliefs and values (Fattah, 1981).

Saudi Arabia's culture and traditions are different from the United States and are used as a basis of comparison for two reasons: first, Saudi Arabia and the United States are young wealthy countries that continue to progress (Al-Shaman, 1993); and second, to see if Saudi Arabian secondary school teachers' levels of job satisfaction are different from that of secondary school teachers in the United States.

Limited information on Saudi female teachers' job satisfaction and principal leadership behavior in Saudi Arabia is available, thus it is necessary to also look at research conducted about male teachers. Benton and Halloran (1991) indicated that men have reported a higher degree of job satisfaction than women, but more recently differences have diminished, due in part to more equal opportunities for the employment and advancement of women.

An empirical study conducted in Qatar by (a country adjacent to Saudi Arabia that shares its religion and culture) Al-Sheikh and Salamah (1982) revealed

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that the difference between male and female levels of job satisfaction is not significant. A similar study conducted in the United States by Windel (1991) also found no significant difference between male and female teachers' job satisfaction.

Although the Holy Quraan does not state that men and women should be separate in the field of education and labor, traditionally, to ensure a stable family life, women are not permitted to mix freely with men (AL-Hariri, 1989).

It is easy to speculate that the differences in levels of job satisfaction between Saudi female secondary public school teachers and their counterparts in the United States may be due to cultural factors such as the attitude towards women's education, the fact that education is segregated by gender, and the regency of education for women

Despite growing acceptance of women's education in Saudi Arabia, education for women still faces conservative attitudes from many Saudi citizens. Such conservative thinking focuses on women building the traditional roles of wives and mothers and may cause fear that education may weaken these roles. These conservative attitudes towards women's education are not related to the influences of Islam, but may be part of the traditions of the Saudi Society (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991). In addition, women receive fewer formal courses in school administration and in-service training than men (Al-Shakhis, 1984; Al-Shaman, 1993; & Marza 1991).

Women administrators receive inadequate training; as a result, female

school principals are less qualified in leadership behaviors and supervision
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than their male counterparts are. Teachers should have a chance to use what they have learned in education courses. They also should be involved in the planning and decision-making process regarding curriculum, time use, classroom instructions, method of instructions, resource allocation, and procedures for students' evaluation. Including them as active participants would be an excellent first step in enhancing their job satisfaction.

Women and Society

There are many different aspects in understanding and exploring the Saudi Arabian culture, particularly the role and status of the women. In Saudi Arabia, women have been given idle lives to lead and are limited within their homes.

In Saudi Arabia, girls are socialized from their early years to obtain a domestic role that fits their gender roles. For girls in Saudi Arabia, becoming a mother is the norm and is the biggest goal of her life. She is raised to believe that she should aim to be a "good mother" and that it is her responsibility to devote her time to her husband and children. The education of Saudi women must be supported by the state. The women of Saudi Arabia have become one of the fastest changing elements of society.

Women's rights groups in Saudi Arabia are not functional and that is why women, including foreigners, are not allowed to drive motor vehicles in the public facilities. The women are also not supposed to ride on motor vehicles with strangers. One should either be accompanied by a close relative, an employee or the employer (Helen, 2007). Though justice cannot be practiced by one's own hand. This law denies women the right to make use of a taxi as <https://assignbuster.com/women-involved-in-the-leadership-of-saudi-arabia-sociology-essay/>

a means of transport in the absence of the husband or any close relative.

Women also cannot make use of motorbikes and bicycles in a public scene (Colin, 2005).

A Saudi woman cannot be admitted into any hospital without the consent of family members of male gender. This, in addition, includes the denial of both domestic and foreign travel of women on solitary basis. However, women are finding other means of maneuvering through this rule in the business industry through the intensive use of the internet (Anders, 1998).

Both legal and social controls combined with the legal sanctioning in the religious practices limit a woman's freedom of movement in the country. From the government perspective, this is aimed at protecting the women as a necessity while others perceive the laws as a way of accelerating and empowering the male and their dominance in the society, (Helen, 2007).

In this case, a woman should be in the locality unless under the company of the mahram (a male guardian in relation to you) and secondly, the woman is not allowed to have a direct physical contact with a male outside the relation of the family. The society is dominated by males and in this case, most of these boundaries take effects. For the foreign women, the employers usually pick their passports and this localizes the individual to the town of residence. This hinders the females' dominance and their publicity in the public domain and locks the women out of leadership roles, (Colin, 2005).

Women of the Middle East have long been viewed as an oppressed group.

From the desert sands of Saudi Arabia to the mountainous lands of

Afghanistan, Arab women have faced many hardships in their society. While <https://assignbuster.com/women-involved-in-the-leadership-of-saudi-arabia-sociology-essay/>

the role of a woman is meant to be nurturing and domestic, many have moved on to a more modern view, and have taken on the role as educators and laborers. Arab women threaten the traditional family structure by doing so; however, for many it is a sacrifice they are willing to make, as they see that the world has more to offer than just household chores and childbearing.

Women and Political Leadership

The participation of women in the public domain, including the political arena, is very limited in Saudi Arabia. Unlike other Arab Gulf women, Saudi women still face an uphill struggle to gain political and social rights and need the consent of male guardians for almost everything, including obtaining a passport and travel.

The hierarchical system of the Saudi government does not allow for democratic voting. Saudi Arabian political leaders are, therefore, hiding behind false religious pretexts by withholding many rights from women. It is a violation of their own religious beliefs and practices. Other Islamic countries, such as Egypt, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain, allow women to vote and still maintain their traditional and religious practices.

The country does not contain any political parties, thus the absence of elections. Women are becoming more active in reform but their efforts are marginalized. The extent of reform is determined by the ruling family (Cordesman, 2003).

Alyousif attributes the lack of a political role for Saudi women to educational decisions. " Very few Saudi women major in political science, and this major

used to be closed to women. By restructuring some of the universities and providing the major [to women], we are establishing the beginning of a new era in which young women study politics academically before applying it on the ground." However, a careful analysis of the powers female Saudi officials possess shows that their positions are superficial. For example, Princess Dr. al-Jawhara bint Fahd al-Saud was undersecretary of education for women's colleges for 10 years before becoming president of Riyadh University for Women in April 2007. And yet, in a conference on women's rights, she told hundreds of women that as undersecretary she " did not have the necessary powers to make decisions, even though this position is the third highest ranking in the Ministry of Education" (Nora Alyousif, 2007).

The country lacks the basic freedoms for even the civil society to take part in the leadership. It is very hard to start new organizations and even more so the women groups, due to their co-option by the government. I would recommend the existence of political parties in the country with free elections since this would foster democratic growth in the country (Anders, 1998). The media should be free to express their ideas and women rights agencies should be supported to help in the equality of gender, promote the growth of the economy and the active participation of women in the exercising of political power (Kathleen, 1991).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the family and societal factors that influenced Saudi women in their pursuit of leadership po