Saudi Women and the Muslim State in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

Islam has shaped the history and character of Saudi Arabia since the beginning of the 6th century A.D. The advent of oil in the Saudi scene has been of primary importance to the country in the past century. Oil revenues have been used to develop a vast network of infrastructure across the wide desert. However, challenges still remain as Saudi Arabia carefully treads the twenty first century. The most poignant of them all is the status of Muslim women in this developing nation. Although significant efforts were made by the government to integrate women in development notwithstanding the strong and persistent pressure exercised by religious leaders, a lot of ambiguity about women's paradoxical situation still remains. The reasons are complex but the first major one is that the debate on women's role in society is taking place within the framework of the "Arab Islamic heritage". The dilemma on the status of women in Saudi Arabia will take a long time to resolve since it is caught up in the larger debate on the role of religion and cultural traditions in society. Since Islam is the defining factor for the Saudi nation, tradition must be either cast aside or reinterpreted.

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Saudi Arabia: The Land of Islam and Oil

The birth of Islam.

Islam is the single factor that has shaped the history and character of Saudi Arabia. In 570 AD, the prophet Mohamed was born in Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula. At that time, the Arabs appeared to be a backward people who were simply ignored in their desert by the two giants that dominated the region, the Romans and the Persians. By the time of the prophet's death in 632 A.D., most of the Arabian Peninsula had become united under Arab rule. Islam conquered Iran, which was Islamicized forever, and Islam became a promise of power, unity, and triumph for a marginalized people divided and occupied, who wasted their energy in intertribal wars. Yamani (1997) states that the Islam that the fundamentalists today lay claim to as the solution to economic problems and military defeats treasures the memory of this scarcely believable life of a young Meccan who declared himself a prophet at the age of 40 and, in 22 years of preaching interspersed with military expeditions, realized before his death the dreams that seemed impossible to his contemporaries: the union of the Arabs through a religious faith and their emergence on the international scene as a world power.

This combination of Arabian culture and Islam has shaped the character of the region ever since. Islam is totally ingrained in the fabric of contemporary Saudi life. All Saudis are Muslims, with a vast majority as true believers or practitioners. Shari'a (Islamic doctrine) is the law and constitution of the land. The Sunna, (the tradition of the prophet) regulates daily life. Al-Shahadah (the Oath to God) forms the Saudi Arabian flag. The King is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. The two holiest cities in

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Islam, Makkah and Madinah, are in Saudi Arabia, making the country the focal point for over one billion Muslims worldwide. All of these factors regulate and influence the daily lives of the people in Saudi Arabia and are expected to prevail in the future like no other Islamic country on earth. It is believed that Islam will continue to hold together the fabric of Saudi Society in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Islam is not a complicated religion. The five key duties that Muslims have to carry out directed everyone toward the same idea: submission of the daily behavior of the individual to a strict discipline. Above everything else, Islam is an earthly religion, rooted in the most banal acts of everyday life (washing, eating, etc.), but also permitting one to constantly situate oneself in the cosmos. The Shahada is the first duty: it is a profession of faith that consists of recognizing that Allah is the sole God and that Mohammad is his prophet. The salat, praying five times a day, is the second. It is an extremely rapid exercise in intense meditation. You must, wherever you are, at home, at work, or in transit, stop what you are doing, face Mecca, and try through the discipline of concentration to transcend your daily problems and put yourself in contact with the divine, and do all this in a very short period of time. The first prayer is said at dawn, the second when the sun is at midpoint, the third when the sun begins its descent, the fourth at sunset, and the fifth when the night has fallen. Fasting during the month of Ramadan from sunrise to sunset is the third duty. Giving alms is the fourth. Finally, the pilgrimage to Mecca for those who can make it is the fifth duty (Mernissi, 1993).

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<u>The power of oil and the achievement of infrastructure in the 20th century.</u>

From a poor nation of Bedouins, fragmented into scattered tribes, and whose only source of foreign income came from pilgrims to the holy cities, Saudi Arabia is today a rich and modern nation, with all the amenities of wealth and affluence. The advent of oil in the Saudi scene has been of primary importance to the country in the past century. The Saudi Arabian sands have beneath them 25 percent of the recognized world oil reserves. Saudi Arabia has one of the most advanced industries with the lowest production costs for its crude. It is reputed as a reliable oil supplier with the capability of increasing its production to meet the needs of its many global clients, in a manner, which protects the international economic interests. It can increase its production by nearly 35 percent at short notice without damaging its plants and reserves. It has also reached efficient economies of scale in its oil sector with the lowest production cost and largest oil reserves in the world. (Cordesman, 1997). However, notwithstanding the interdependence of world nations, as long as there is no alternative to Saudi oil supply at present, a durable shut down in the Saudi oil-fields would have devastating effects on the world economy beyond what can ever be imagined.

The revenue from oil has been wisely invested into the modernization of the country in all possible sectors. The funds expended are the highest per capita in the world over the last quarter of a century. The development of the infrastructure has been complete both in type and in geographic coverage. Saudi Arabia now boasts a complete road network linking all corners of the country. It operates over thirty national and international airports with a large national aircraft fleet. The kingdom has the largest

water desalination capacity in the world, a fully developed water distribution network, and a huge electric generation capacity. Furthermore, it has built an ultra modern telecommunication system, provides a functional state subsidized health sector, and a large number of schools, colleges and universities spread throughout the vast country. The kingdom has also provided affordable housing of good quality and succeeded in city planning in most urban centers, which is envied by other Third World nations. (Cordesman, 1997).

Saudi Arabia's successful economic development has certainly altered its demographic and social fabric. The growing importance of the middle class, the shift from the rural existence of farmers and Bedouins to the modern concept of industry and technical businesses, and the impact of enormous material wealth, these are all results that Saudi Arabia is proud of as a nation.

However, Saudi Arabia is in the process of rapid demographic change. According to a conservative World Bank estimate, Cordesman (1997) states that if Saudi Arabia's current growth rate continues, its population will reach 26 million in 2005 and 42 million in 2020, up from 22 million in 2000. Roughly 43% of Saudi Arabia's population is 14 years of age or younger, and more than 58% of the kingdom population is under the age of 17. The fact that Saudi Arabia has such a young population means that the work force will grow at an especially high rate. A combination of lower oil prices and population growth has already made major cuts in Saudi Arabia's per capita oil wealth. Current projections indicate that petroleum wealth per capita will drop by another 50% by the year 2010 and possibly as soon as 2005. Saudi Arabia will only be able to maintain

current living standards if it achieves substantial growth in the productive sectors of the economy, and is able to change from reliance on a largely foreign labor force to one that is largely Saudi.

In summary, present-day Saudi Arabia is one of the largest market economies in the Middle East. It is difficult for both Saudis and foreigners to stand back and realize the true extent of infrastructural development in the Kingdom over the last half a century. From virtually nothing, Saudi Arabia now has a world-class infrastructure network. The revenue from oil has been wisely invested into the modernization of the country in all sectors of the economy. However, Saudi Arabia is facing many challenges as it treads into the 21st century. The significant growth in its young population, a substantial decrease in its per capita oil wealth and its excessive reliance on foreign labor, all contribute to destabilize its impressive developmental path. Furthermore, with the sudden spotlight on Islam and Muslim societies, and in particular the plight of women, it is hardly surprising that the Saudi society is suddenly squirming under this close scrutiny and torn between admitting the desire to progress and emancipate its women and defending its failure to do so.

The economic expectations and the social responsibilities of the government for the 21st century.

Saudi Arabia's key security challenge is not external threats, or internal extremism, but the need to come firmly to grips with its economy. Although the Saudi government has made efforts to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil wealth, the petroleum sector still accounts for about 90% of all Saudi export revenues, 75-85% of all budget revenues and 53% of the Saudi GDP (Cordesman, 1997). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia also

experienced a drastic drop in liquidity because of both the cut in its oil revenues and its expenditures for the Gulf War. Therefore, it was forced to liquidate a substantial amount of its foreign investment to pay for the Gulf War and its budget deficits.

In addition, water is both an economic problem and a strategic vulnerability. Saudi Arabia's rapid increase in population and the government subsidies of agriculture is causing its natural water resources per capita to drop sharply. Furthermore, there are many other subsidies, which affect the Saudi budget. The absence of meaningful direct taxation, the subsidies to provide early free utilities, low-cost fuel, telecommunications, and air fares, and highly subsidized or free housing, education, medical services, even businesses, investments, and partnership arrangements, all significantly affect the Saudi budget. The key economic challenge Saudi Arabia faces is not its current balance of payments or budget deficit, but to create a form of capitalism that suits Saudi social custom, that is run and staffed by Saudi, and that steadily expands the productive sector beyond oil and gas exports and large-scale downstream operations.

Another problem that Saudi Arabia must firmly address is the interaction between its growing demographic problems and its over-dependence on foreign labor. The welfare economy has helped create a dependence on foreign labor that is expensive and unproductive and which has helped delay the "Saudization" of the labor force and the development of productive careers and realistic expectations among Saudi Arabia's native population. This combination of population growth and dependence on foreign labor may be the greatest single threat to Saudi Arabia's stability and security.

The problem is further exacerbated by a failing educational system. Cordesman (1997) states that studies by the ILO and World Bank indicate that the Saudi educational system is failing to adequately educate neither male nor female students for future jobs, and is steadily deteriorating in quality and economic relevance. Further, the existing Saudi labor force is now grossly over-committed to the government and service sectors and much of it does not work at real jobs. For example, three to four Saudis are often employed for every real job in the private and government sector and a foreigner is often hired to do the work. At least half of the Saudis now employed do not perform any real economic function. Their "jobs" are simply disguised unemployment, and most employed young Saudi males now have to face the frustration of working in a non-job. There is lack of realism in the government's efforts to address the problems in the Saudi educational system and their attempts to develop an effective work ethic by creating programs tailored to train Saudi males for jobs have so far failed. Although several Saudi Chambers of Commerce, the industry as well as the private sector are beginning to create such programs, the effort is miniscule relative to the need. In fact, Saudi Arabia is expanding non-economic Islamic education problems far more quickly than it is doing anything that makes native Saudis more employable.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has also maintained much higher levels of public spending than its revenues justify. Until recently, it has kept up its spending on domestic and public service, and military forces, at the cost of growing budget deficits. The rapid increase in Saudi Arabia's population has also meant a steady reduction in its per capita GDP and oil exports, and is imposing growing limits on what Saudi Arabia can afford to

spend per person on subsidies and its social "safety net". Like other Southern Gulf States, Saudi Arabia has tended to minimize deep structural problems in its economy that are not "temporary" or a function of short-term oil prices.

In the past, Saudi Arabia has done a better job of distributing oil wealth, modernizing education and infrastructure, encouraging the private sector, and providing new job opportunities than most developing nations. Its persistent budget deficits and dependency on volatile oil prices, however, are warnings of growing structural problems in the Saudi economy. They are also a warning that its past policy of using a large portion of the nations' oil wealth to minimize internal tensions and religious friction cannot continue indefinitely (Cordesman, 1997).

Saudi Arabia faces other internal problems that may ultimately be more important than the politics of its royal family. What was once a rural and isolated Saudi society, divided into regional and tribal groups, has become a society that is largely urbanized, exposed to a wide range of electronic media, and dependent on a modern petroleum driven economy. Virtually all children now receive education through the secondary school level. Cordesman (1997) states that the CIA estimates that the once largely illiterate population has reached an overall literacy rate of 62%.

In sum, Saudi Arabia faces important challenges in funding a level of social services and economic development, which will ensure that all regional groups receive a share of the nation's oil wealth and operate within a "safety net" that defuses or reduces social protest. Even "oil wealth" is relative; and must be measured in terms of per capita income, national imports, and governmental spending.

Redefining development.

Toward the end of the last decade in the twentieth century, Saudi Arabia began to talk more frequently and more eloquently about the need to integrate women in development. This Saudi awakening came as a result of worldwide process that gained momentum in the last quarter of the century when the United Nations declared 1975 International Women's Year. The Year became a Decade, its aim to achieve equality for women, and development and peace for the world, which was reiterated in Nairobi 1985 and later in Beijing 1995.

It could not be said that the aims of the UN 2nd Decade had been achieved in the Arab world or anywhere else as was admitted during the end of the 2nd Decade conference in Beijing in 1995. Shaheed stated that the recommendations of the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), which groups 13 Arab countries, revealed the unique approach that the Arab region took with respect to women's development. It stated that the Strategy for Arab Women in Western Asia to the Year 2000 is based on the heritage of Arab-Islamic civilization and the religious and spiritual values of this region, the cradle of the messages of God, which affirm the dignity, and freedom of all human beings in this universe (Afkhami, 1996). This statement was a clear indication of the Arab attachment to a shared heritage; but the fact that it was necessary to assert this so categorically indicated an uneasy awareness that this ideal was under threat. Moreover, the statement immediately defined the framework for any discussion of women in the Arab world today: such a discussion had to fall within the framework of "the heritage of the Arab-Islamic civilization".

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The United Nations through its various agencies as well as its regularly held annual conferences continues to exert significant efforts to hold the Arab states accountable to improve the status of its women. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination held its sixty–second session in New York in March 2003. It concluded in its final report that while Saudi Arabia provided in its report information on relevant laws and regulations and the court system, no information was provided on the political structure and the demographic characteristics of the population. Furthermore, the Committee emphasizes that guarantees of non-discrimination laid down in law, without mechanisms to monitor their application, do not on their own ensure the enjoyment of non-discrimination (United Nations, 2003).

In Saudi Arabia, there is no doubt that the process of integrating women in development has produced mixed results. Saudi women's involvement in the work sector remains, limited and their entitlement to equality under the law remains ambivalent. The reasons are complex but the first major one is that the debate on women's role in society is taking place within the framework of the "Arab Islamic heritage". This has resulted in a schizophrenic approach, which both encourages women to join in the process of development as equal partners and holds them back in their place as secondary actors within the family context. This dilemma will take time to resolve in Saudi Arabia, because the debate on the role of women in society is caught up in the larger debate on the role of religion in society.

The second reason is that the process of development itself has been a poorly defined and ill-executed venture in Saudi Arabia, as in other parts of the Third World.

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The efforts of Saudi Arabia to produce and distribute wealth, health, and education have not been particularly successful, partly because of inexperience, and partly because of apathy, since the majority of the people have been excluded from the decision-making process. Thus, those who argue that the opportunity for education and work in the modern sector will of itself liberate women's capacities ignore the fact that the capacity of Saudi society as a whole is largely unliberated. Having started in second place, Saudi women have further to go to catch up, but fewer opportunities to do so.

In her book Womanpower: The Arab debate on women at work, Nadia Hijab (1989) lists three conditions which must be met before women can be fully integrated into the wage labor force: need, opportunity, and ability. These three conditions must be met at the state and at the popular levels. At the state level, 'need' refers to a country's manpower requirements; 'opportunity' to refer to official efforts to create the proper environment for employment, through planning and legislation; and 'ability' to refer to the government's efforts to train people in requisite skills. At the popular level, 'need' refers to a family's or an individual's requirements for income; 'opportunity' refers to the social and cultural obstacle to women's work; and 'ability' refers to an individual's possession of the right skills.

Although, this may sound like a statement of the obvious, but it needs to be said since most of the discussion on the lack of Saudi women participation in the economic development of the country focuses on social, religious, and cultural factors, almost to the exclusion of the others. In fact, the status of women in Saudi Arabia, as in the Arab

world, is changing need and opportunity. As a result, tradition must either be cast aside or reinterpreted.

The Debate on the Status of Saudi Women in Islam

Concept of gender equality in Islam.

The Quran revealed to the Prophet: " I will deny no man or woman among you the reward of their labors. You are members, one of another". The fact that men and women function in different spheres has no bearing whatsoever on the ultimate equality – equality in the eyes of God (Khan, 1993). Man and woman in the eyes of Islam are not the duplicates of one another, but the complements, there being in each quite incontrovertible, biological differences which lead to the natural separation of sphere and occupation. This division of labor permits the shortcomings of one sex to be compensated for by the strengths of the other.

The holy Quran considers both the sexes as having originated from one living being and hence they enjoy the same status. The Quran does not subscribe to the view that Eve was born from the crooked rib of Adam and thus has an inferior status. In fact, it is a biblical explanation, not a Quranic one. Equality of the sexes in its generalized sense firstly means acceptance of the dignity of the sexes in equal measure. Secondly, one has to see both men and women enjoying equal rights: social, economic, and political. Both should have equal rights to contract a marriage or to dissolve it; both should have the right to own or dispose of property without interference from the other; both should be free to choose their own profession or way of life; both should be equal in responsibility as much as in freedom (Engineer, 1992).

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Thus, no doubt there is a general thrust towards equality of the sexes in the Quran. The Quran gives a place of great honor to the whole of humanity, which includes both the sexes. It advocates equal rights for women. The Quran does not only create a belief about the rights of women but clearly declares that they are equal to men in matters of rights. According to the Quran women's religious status, like their social status, is as high as that of men.

There are many interpretations of the Quran done by several conservative and modern jurists (Ulama). The traditional Ulama sometimes ignore the context and select certain versus from the Quran to prove their point of view. While the traditionalist state that the Quran gives man a slight edge over woman, the modernists reply that this is not due to any inherent weakness of the female sex, but rather due to the social context since he earns and spends his wealth on women. Furthermore, certain verses may be interpreted by the traditionalist to support wife beating, punishment, and expectation of total obedience towards the husband. The modernists on the other hand, interpret those same verses as supporting submission to the will of God and obedience to God. Thus, the difficulty arises when Muslim jurists see these verses as a normative prescription rather than in its proper social context. They tend to ignore the context and select certain verses from the Quran to prove their point of view.

Engineer (1992) states another sure indication of equality of sexes mentioned in the Quran is that women have been given the right to hold property in their own right; neither the father nor the husband of a woman has any right to tamper with their property. Thus, the woman's right to own property is so absolute that even if she is rich and her

husband poor, he has to maintain her and she would not be obliged to spend anything from her property or income to maintain herself and her children. Furthermore, in the event of divorce, he should keep her as he himself lives and, if she becomes pregnant, he must spend freely on her upkeep and after the delivery of the child, she should be paid for nursing it, the future of the child being decided through mutual consultation.

It is certainly not easy to make sexual equality acceptable to all, even in our own times. It was much more difficult for the Islamic ideals of human equality in general and sexual equality in particular to be made acceptable at a time when women were treated like slaves. It is surprising that such an ideal was, at least partially, practiced for a few decades. Later the position of women in Islamic society degenerated very fast. By the time the Shari'a began to be codified, all sorts of pre-Islamic and non-Islamic influences had affected the thinking of Muslim jurists. It was under these alien and non-Islamic influences that the great thinkers of Islam came to codify their thoughts on women.

To give an idea of how women came to lose the social status given them by Islam in latter-day Islamic society, Engineer (1992) quotes from a Muslim writer showing what an ideal woman was thought to be.

> "An ideal woman according to him, speaks and laughs rarely and never without a reason. She never leaves the house, even to see neighbors or her acquaintance. She has no women friends, confides in nobody, and relies only on her husband. She accepts nothing from anyone, excepting her husband and her parents. If she sees relatives, she does not meddle in their affairs. She is not treacherous, and has no faults to hide, nor wrong reasons to proffer. She does not try to entice people.

If her husband shows the intention of performing conjugal rites, she is agreeable to satisfy his desires and occasionally rouses them. She always assists him in his affairs. She does not complain much and sheds few tears. She does not laugh or rejoice when she sees her husband moody or sorrowful; but shares his troubles, and cheers him up, until he is quite content again. She does not surrender herself to anybody but her husband, even if abstinence would kill her....Such a woman is cherished by everyone" (p. 57).

Women and citizenship in the Quran.

The imperfect nature of women's citizenship rights in Middle Eastern societies results from a built-in discrepancy between constitutions that award equal rights to men and women and shari'a derived personal codes that undermine this equality and even more insidiously from secular codes that define women as wards of men and their families. In Saudi Arabia, rights and entitlements are mediated via membership in families and communities that are animated by a patriarchal logic that privileges certain members (elder males) and disempowers others (juniors and women). Hence, the emancipatory measures directed at Saudi women (education, employment, legal reforms) by modern monarchs were never intended as renegotiation of men's existing privileges but merely to endow women with additional capabilities and responsibilities.

The Quran speaks of the community of Islam (Umma) as "the best community produced for mankind, command good and forbid evil and believe in God" (Stowasser, 1996, p. 26). The Quranic Umma is a theocratic state in that God's will is given language through revelation to His chosen Prophet and spokesman, who thereby also obtains

rightful authority to rule. According to the Quran, then, membership in the Umma hinges on righteous submission to the Almighty in faith, worship, and the fulfillment of His law, while the common well being is realized in spiritual and moral well-being; both individual and collective. Thus, Muslims in Quranic definition are "subjects" in their relationship to God as their sovereign and lawgiver.

Stowasser (1996) states that among the many Quranic passages that define human righteousness, frequently revealed in the context of human accounting to God and God's judgment of humankind on the last day, a sizable number of verses are cast in gender-specific language. These Quranic passages place great emphasis on faith, devotion, worship, and the duties of almsgiving and fasting that represent the essence of Muslim rituals. In addition, humility, patience, truthfulness, and chastity outside of marriage-all primarily traits of individual and private godliness-are included. Individual righteousness is linked to the moral well being of the community as a whole, just as the individual impiety and immorality work to the detriment of the collective. Muslim and Western Quranic scholars alike acknowledge that the late Meccan, and specially the Medinan suras were largely concerned with the structuring of the community of Islam, which included the definition of citizenship in the community as based on individual virtue. Stowasser states that to build God's society on earth required women 's integration into the community, and it is for this reason that the Quran legislated for equality of the sexes in moral citizenship of the Umma.

Therefore, the Quranic definition of equality consists of several components compatible within the context of the Islamic Umma as "republic of virtue" but which

differ from Western late eighteenth-century sociopolitical theories and legal concepts. These components are, first, that equality is a function of morality and goodness, and second, that it means equal service toward the collective well being of the community.

Muslim personal and family law.

Family laws, that is, laws that govern relations between men and women in marriage, divorce, inheritance, guardianship, and custody of children, provoked considerable debate at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995. Women from Muslim societies discussed the contradiction between the affirmation of the universality of women's rights and the principle of legal equality in the Platform for Action and the existence of contrary family laws. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination pointed to this contradiction in its concluding observations included in its report in March 2003. It observed that Under the Nationality Regulations, a Saudi woman is unable to transmit her nationality to her child when she is married to a foreign national and a foreign man is unable to acquire Saudi nationality in the same manner as a foreign woman.

The Quran does not associate its principle of equal human dignity and worthiness with notions such as absolute and individual social, political, or economic equality. That is, the Quran legislates equality in terms not comparable to the natural law concept of "human rights" that Western political theory derived from various ideological and political platforms first formulated and applied in eighteenth century Europe and America. Indeed, the Quran sanctions unequal distribution of economic and

sociopolitical power and, especially in its family laws, establishes a link between economic power and social control (Stowasser, 1996).

The extensive family laws of the Quran specify for the Muslim female some basic rights of social status and economic competence, but the law's intent lies largely with the preservation of the family order, not the promulgation of male of female individual rights. Among the many directives concerning the institutions of marriage and parenthood, one Quranic revelation succinctly stipulates that the godly Muslim family order rests on the husband's authority over his wife as occasioned by his responsibility for her economic support and on the wife's obedience to her husband's authority (Qiwama or being in charge). This revealed decree of an essential difference in family roles of male and famale forms part of the Quranic purposes to strengthen the family. Woman's righteousness is realized when she accepts her place and obligations in this divinely legislated system. Muslim scholastic interpretation, however, extended the application of men's qiwama to areas beyond the family until it became a fundamental legal principle of male social and political preeminence in the Islamic Umma.

Kazi (1997) states that recent feminist research reveals a tradition of male monopoly over religious interpretation in Muslim societies. Arguments justifying discrimination in family codes and laws mirror the political projects of regimes and are a reminder that law is not a neutral agent but reflects dominant power relations in society. Many Muslims use the argument that daughters who have been given half the share in inheritance compared to their brothers are considered inferior to men in worth. Engineer (1996) argues that sexual equality is altogether a different category from inheritance. The

former is a moral category while the latter is an economic one. Inheritance depends very much on a social and economic structure and the function of a particular sex within it. Women had a role different from men's in Arabian society when the holy Quran was revealed. Without keeping this in mind, we cannot draw proper conclusions from the concerned verses about inheritance in the Quran.

However, it must be pointed out that Muslim society consistently violated the Quranic injunction to give women their due share in inheritance. The Quran was kind to women and the weaker sections but Muslim society was not so generous. Life is governed more by sociological than theological realities and the law of inheritance as far as the women are concerned, was observed more in the breach than the observance. Women were generally deprived of their share, especially in agricultural societies where dividing land caused problems.

The view that women should be confined to the four wall of the home and should have no role to play outside it is not a Quranic one. There is no direct or indirect mention of this in the Quran. As far as the Quran is concerned, a woman can play any role in life without violating the limits of Allah. Her right to earn and be master of her properties has been recognized by the Quran. Thus, it is said in the Quran "For men is the benefit of what they earn. And for women is the benefit of what they earn". This is a very clear statement, leaving no room for differing interpretations. A woman can earn independently of her father as daughter, of her husband as wife, and of her brother as sister and can be sole owner of what she earns. However, as mentioned earlier, Islamic society came under the influence of the highly feudalized societies of Byzantine and

Persia to the disadvantage of women. Subsequently, hundreds of ahadith (Prophetic traditions) were forged and were uncritically accepted by theologians (Engineer, 1996).

In a modern industrial and increasingly technological economy, women have to play an adaptable role. They have to take up jobs to ensure a comfortable family life particularly given the increasing demand made on the family and available economic opportunities. As already pointed out, there is nothing in the Quran, which prevents women from working. On the contrary, it confirms that whatever she earns is her and hers alone. The view that a woman has to look after the home and children are not, strictly speaking, a Quranic view; it is essentially a juristic view. What is required by the Quran is not that she cannot work but that the man has to maintain his wife and in return the wife has to look after the children. This does not deprive a woman of her right to work; it only establishes an equation between wife and husband. The equation, it should be noted, is not mandatory. The wife can choose to work and establish an equation according to which both will share family expenses, the upkeep of the house and bringing up the children. There are no restrictions on a woman going out of the house and earning, provided she protects her chastity and restrains her sexual urge. The same thing is demanded of men also. (Engineer, 1996).

Law firms in Saudi Arabia are just beginning to pay increasing attention to the unique legal needs of Saudi women. In 2002 Ahmad Zaki Yamani law firm established the first women's department as part of the firm. The idea of a women's legal department did not take shape without criticism or problems. The main problem is that women are unable to practice law in Saudi Arabia. According to the Kingdom's legal

system, a law school graduate from a university abroad who works or trains for three years at a law firm in Saudi Arabia can be licensed as a lawyer. It is, however, only men who can be licensed (Arab News, 2003).

Fundamentalism and Women's Rights

Saudi women and the Islamist movements.

It is one thing to fight for an expansion of women's rights in Saudi Arabia under an Islamic regime where there is little space for a secularist opposition, and quite a different matter to fight for women's rights in states such as Egypt, Turkey, or Tunisia where Islamist movements are contenders for state power within a pluralistic and diversified context. Kandiyoti stated, "a significant female constituency may find not only solace and solidarity in Islamic militancy but a legitimate route to greater empowerment" (Afkhami and Friedl, 1997, p. 6). The rhetoric played by militant Islamists against the West and the privileged local elite who are seen as aping the West produces a discourse of moral rectitude and cultural integrity with authoritarian overtones.

A substantial literature now argues that women are often singled out as the bearers of their culture's authenticity and are made to serve as boundary makers. There are many reasons why the control of women in Saudi Arabia and the regulation of gender relations may emerge as issues, which generate broad political consensus. For example, the issue of Islamic modesty of women may activate cross class alliances among Saudi men. Generally, one of the pillars of populist consensus is to create the fiction of a harmonious and homogenous national community by projecting division and dissent to

the "outside" and by labeling nonconformist nationals as dangerous aliens. (Kandiyoti, 1997). Hard-line policies often take the form of restrictions placed on the airwaves and on women's bodies. Where there is no secular state or a political opposition to combat, enforcement of Islamic law in Saudi Arabia may be seen as an attempt at social control.

Authoritarian measures in Saudi Arabia appear both more legitimate and palatable when they are presented as an implementation of shari'a law. It also seems that in the Saudi society with little or no democratic legacy authoritarianism that are well grounded in local customs have a greater chance of eliciting consent than the surveillance of secular police states, which are generally the alternative. Such measures are even more popular when religiously sanctioned discipline is coupled with anticorruption rhetoric and welfare programs for the poorest to create an image of Islamically "just" society. That this "justice" should be based on the curtailment of women's mobility, women's access to education and to paid work, and equity within marriage with respect to divorce, child custody, and rights to maintenance, may appear as a rather small and unimportant point in societies where these rights are by no means assured anyway.

Furthermore, the long and painful process of thinking and discussion that produced humanist norms in the West is denied to other societies. Cheriet states that the "export of human rights is carried on under conditions of post-cold war globalization, and this is as problematic as the model of economic and social development introduced by the newly independent states of the early 1960s" (Afkhami and Friedl, 1997, p. 12). Thus, since the procedures of the changes in Saudi Arabia were not derived from local

development and were not coordinated with local cultural practices, it is not surprising that the developmental philosophy of these induced policies produced strong reactions.

A Gendered Vision of Religious Fundamentalism.

The adherents of the Islamist movement in Saudi Arabia identify the West not only as a cultural invader bringing estrangement but also as detrimental to the divine order, which relies on a clearly defined gender-based cosmology. The emergence of the Islamist fundamentalist movement is a primarily culturalist claim coinciding with the access of thousands of Saudi households to European and American cable television programs. These were simultaneously watched and condemned strongly by Muslim youths, who criticized especially what they perceived as immodest behavior between men and women in films and the high profiles of female characters.

In the opinion of Islamist feminists women are oppressed precisely because they try to be "equal" to men and are, therefore, put in unnatural settings and unfair situations that denigrate them and take away their integrity and dignity as women. In other words, for Islamists feminists it is the demands of a Western feminism, with its emphasis on total equality of the sexes, which results in women striving to be "superhuman" and in the process carrying more burdens. For them, a just Islamic society is one that strives for a recognition of and respect for compatibility between the sexes instead of competition between them.

Islamist movements resemble nationalist movements of an earlier epoch in their attempts to mobilize women for their causes. Thus, for the time being there are few attempts to curtail the public activities of these women, at least not by the moderate male

Islamists, especially when many of these activities include organizing (Islamic) literacy classes and instruction in sewing and household management. Thus, Islamist discourse is gaining legitimacy as the only credible social, economic, and political alternative to the existing "corrupt", "undemocratic", and socially handicapped state.

Although universal compliance with women's international human rights still seems an elusive goal, the impact of Beijing conference more often than not has placed opponents to women's equality in Saudi Arabia on the defensive. Muslim leaders now seem reluctant to state squarely that they believe women are precluded from enjoying equality in rights by reason of their sex. Indeed, already during preparatory stages of the Beijing conference Arab governments showed an awareness of the inadvisability of appearing to block the path to equality for women. Mayer stated that Saudi Arabia preferred not to appear at the Beijing conference at all rather than to have to declare publicly that women should be segregated and supervised by male guardians. Obviously, Saudi leaders calculated that any defense of their policies toward women would expose them to fierce challenges and to ridicule. "Unlike the naïve Taliban, Saudi Arabia's leaders had learned enough about the authority of women's international human rights to feel uneasy about admitting how they treated women (Afkhami and Friedl, 1997, p. 29).

Religious and Secular Discourse

Saudi women: The key to the family.

Within the family, the father has the final say, which in theory gives him ultimate power. Nevertheless, the women's role is the key to maintaining the family. Not only does she reproduce successive generations, ensuring family continuity, size and power,

but also she is also responsible for the new generation's informal education. It is the mother who transmits the cultural and religious traditions that reinforce solidarity and loyalty to the family. It is not surprising that there has been such strong resistance, from men and women alike, to change in women's roles.

Those who argue against any change in women's roles express themselves in religious terms (God willed it so), in appeals to 'reason' (women are naturally, biologically, unsuitable for any function other than motherhood), and in appeals to nationalism (feminism is a form of neo-colonialism developed by the West to subvert the Third World). Underlying all the arguments is the very real fear that, if women allow their key role in the family to be overtaken by other roles, then the whole social system will fall apart.

It should be noted that resistance to change in women's roles in Saudi Arabia does not break down along sexual lines. Within each Saudi family or community, there are liberal men who are open to new ideas and methods, and conservative women who resist change, and vice versa. Some daughters will find support from their Saudi fathers for pursuing their education, careers or travels, in the face of unyielding mothers. Some sisters will find their strongest allies in their Saudi brothers when they need to lobby their parents for more freedom.

Over the last decade, much energy and ink have been expended on debating the harm that change in women's roles in Saudi Arabia would do to the family. However, less time has been spent on assessing how much change has in fact already taken place. Nor have the protagonists paused to question how they can maintain what is good about

the Saudi family i.e. the sense of security it offers, the warmth, the way it ensures that people have more time for one another and more of a share in material goods, while shedding the negative aspects such as its domination over its members, its sacrifice of the individual for the general good, its stifling of initiative and, often, its tyranny regarding its female members and its youth.

Hijab (1989) stated that the Arab world has begun to acquire the worst of both worlds: family links are loosening under the pressures of modern life, resulting in what Arabs view as the negative facets of Western society – the nuclear family and individualism; but few of the positive contributions of Western development in terms of democratic social, economic and political institutions have been transplanted along the way (p. 14).

Tug of war on Saudi women's work.

The Saudi debate on women's work has focused on the same issues during the last quarter of the twentieth century. This is partly because of the complex nature of issues at hand as well as the lack of a strong enough need for change to force the pace. In fact, the modern Saudi Arabian sector can hardly provide enough opportunities for men, let alone for women.

The total labor force as a proportion of the population in the Arab world is low. It has been estimated as ranging between 20 to 30 percent of the Arab population as compared to more than 50% in the developing world (Hijab, 1989). The reasons for the small Arab labor force include the youth of the population and the fact that women constitute a very small proportion of the labor force. However, the statistics for working

women in Saudi Arabia are unreliable. The small proportion of women in the labor force in official statistics does not mean that few Saudi women work, or even that few earn money. In fact, Third World statistics rarely reflect the real number of economically active men and women, although methods are improving steadily. Official statistics tend to define work as labor for wages ignoring a large number of some men and most women from the figures.

In Saudi Arabia, what are viewed as work-related inequalities as measured against United Nations standards are viewed both by policy-making agencies and by public opinion as the proper Islamic balance of rights and responsibilities between men and women. Unlike human rights violations that governments carry out in secret and seek to deny, restrictions on women in Saudi Arabia are apparent to the most casual observer and are promulgated openly as a matter of civic pride. However, in spite of the success of the Council of Senior Ulama in forcing a boycott of the UN Population Conference and the Beijing Conference, 'cultural understandings' are not fixed. In fact, they are being challenged every day by the changing realities of daily life. One of these changing realities can be seen in the opportunities for women in employment, education and civic activities that have emerged in the last ten yeas.

The picture is not one of unrelieved gloom; there are some achievements, particularly in the fields of health and education. Although public education for girls was not available until 1960, almost ten years after it was available for boys, by 1990, there were more girls than boys graduating from secondary schools, and girls as a group have excelled academically over boys. At the university level, the number of female graduates

has increased dramatically, and in the humanities, more female students are enrolled than male. In 1980 more than half of students studying abroad on government scholarships were women, an achievement that was reversed only as a result of government restrictions introduced in 1982 to prevent women from traveling outside the country unchaperoned.

As a byproduct of development, affluence, and social mobility, the extended household in which the young wife becomes a subordinate of her mother-in-law has given way to the nuclear family household, where pressures to emulate the lifestyle of the older generation are mitigated by physical distance and privacy for husband and wife. In addition, women wage earners are having fewer children and getting married at a later age than women without education or skills are. The behavioral facts of life for Saudi women are therefore diverging from the cultural ideal of domesticated womanhood. Doumato observed that the perception of women as creatures of limited intellectual capacity is being undermined by the reality of women's achievements (Afkhami, 1996). By 1990, women constituted 7 percent of the wage-earning workforce. Women are also employed in banks, in the computer operations of utility companies, in television and radio programming and in some ministries. They also work as clerical assistants, journalists, university professors, social workers, physicians and nurses, and are active in women's charitable organizations. In fact, the proliferation of Saudi women volunteers in charitable organizations is a significant expression of their suppressed capacities.

Women in Saudi Arabia are making a growing impact on the economy. About 10% of private businesses in the kingdom are now thought to be run by women,

compared with hardly any a generation ago. They are also making big use of the Internet. However, in this highly conservative Gulf state, women still face many restrictions. For example, a modern Saudi businesswoman may run a team of interior designers from an air-conditioned office in a smart district of the capital, Riyadh. She is a - western-educated, unveiled and willing to take a chance. Unknown to the city's Islamic fundamentalists, she employs a mixed staff. Here, men work alongside women in contravention of Islamic guidelines. After years of training in the United States, she finds it hard to conform to those guidelines. This Saudi woman is not the only one flouting the rules. In all the big Saudi cities, women are secretly working in mixed offices.

The advent of the internet also helps Saudi women to do business online without having to meet male customers in person - something that is still frowned upon there. The Economist profiled two businesswomen who were using the Net to successfully start new businesses, a travel agency and party planning. Internet cafes present certain problems for women, who would have to be next to men if there were no separate section for them. In late 2000 the Abd al-Latif Group, importers of Toyota and Lexus cars in the Kingdom, announced that it would soon open a center where women could take a break from looking at new car models and surf the Net. The Group stated that 30% of their customers were women, and a similar center for men was already quite popular (Teitelbaum, 2002).

Nevertheless, out in public, the 21st century finds Saudi businesswomen still shackled by some archaic rules. They are forbidden to drive cars, which means that male

chauffeurs have to be hired at extra cost. Moreover, they cannot leave the country without written permission from their husband or father. For all the progress they are making in the economy, Saudi businesswomen are hoping that the next few years will see some of the more restrictive rules relaxed.

More than one hundred countries and most United Nations organizations made formal commitments to further women's human rights at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Heyzer and Ladsberg-Lewis stated that women's impact at the many UN conferences shows that women are a global force in international development debates and in providing directions for sustainable human development (in Afkhami and Friedl, 1997). Saudi Arabia as other developing countries faces an increasing pressure to join the fast pace of the global community. The Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister, Prince Turki bin Mohammed, told the BBC that Saudi Arabia's recent signature of a UN convention on eliminating discrimination against women demonstrated the government's commitment to women's rights. However, he also said that all countries in the world have beliefs and traditions that must be respected. Furthermore, Abdullah the crown prince has surprised many by liberalizing policies in a few noteworthy areas, notably the slow introduction of foreign, non Muslim tourism, initiating a debate on the status of women, releasing Islamic dissidents, and introducing the internet into Saudi Arabia.

<u>The hijab, the veil.</u>

The veil 'hijab' is to the Western and Arab observers, the most obvious sign of the Islamic revival. The concept of the word hijab is a three-dimensional, and the three

dimensions often blend into one another. The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight. The root of the verb hajaba means, "to hide". The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. Finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. So we have not just "tangible categories that exist in the reality of the senses-the visual, the spatial-but also an abstract reality in the realm of ideas". (Mernissi, 1993, p. 93). Mernissi states that the concept of the hijab is a key concept in Muslim civilization, just as sin is in the Christian context, or credit is in American capitalist society. She further states that the hijab "descended" from Heaven according to the Quranic verse not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men.

The hijab resurgence at the end of the twentieth century was in response to Muslim's search of identity. It accented the confinement of women as a solution for a pressing crisis. Protecting women from change by veiling them and shutting them out of the world has echoes of closing the community to protect it from the West.

Saudi society regards the veil as an indisputable religious obligation and as a symbol of the depth of religious conviction and solidarity with other Muslim women. For them, the veil is a must; without it, women have not made the essential commitment to a particular ideal of authenticity of identity. Moreover, the veil is seen as a means by which to bridge the gap between the otherwise separate male and female domains. The veil becomes, therefore, not only a symbol of women's identity as Muslims but a holy sanctioned and acceptable means by which to broaden and to further women's political, social, and cultural space. Khan (1996) uses an authoritative Arabic book written by a

famous scholar and traditionalist to explain the Hijab from a religious point of view. He states that "it is clear from the Quran, the Hadith and the practice of the Companions and Tabi'un (companions of the Prophet's Companions) that, whenever a woman steps out of her home, it is incumbent upon her to cover herself completely so as not to show any part of her body except the face and the hands" (p. 226).

The Quran says: "Say to the believing women to turn their eyes away (from temptation) and to preserve their chastity; to cover their adornments except such as we normally displayed". Khan (1996) lists the rules that apply to the hijab. The first rule of hijab is that the hands and face are exempt from covering. The second rule is that the hijab in itself should not be a source of attraction. The third rule of the hijab is that the garment should not be thin because a thin cloth can never provide cover, only serves to accentuate the attraction of a woman, and becomes a potential source of mischief. The fourth condition is that the garment should be loose fitting. The fifth condition of hijab is that the garment should not be perfumed. (while going out) because it stimulates carnal desires in men. The sixth condition of hijab is that a woman's garments should not resemble those of men. The seventh is that it should not resemble that worn by non-believers. The eighth and the final rule of hijab is that a woman's garments should not reflect worldly honor or fame.

Social Changes and Women in Saudi Arabia

Integration or marginalization.

Since the 1970s state expansion, economic development, oil wealth and increased integration within the world system have combined to create educational and

employment opportunities favorable to women in Saudi Arabia. Although benefits have spread unevenly, female education and employment are undermining patriarchal attitudes and practices. But it appears that just "as women have been making inroads into public life, including the work force, a cultural and political backlash in the form of conservative Islamist movements has taken shape and targeted them" (Moghadam, 1993, p. 66). Female labor force participation is still low in relation to that of other regions of the world and of course, in relation to male labor force participation. Moghadam listed several explanatory factors, which are responsible for this among which is the ambivalence of rulers to equality and empowerment for women. Another is the economic crisis facing the region. A third factor is the general low level of industrialization and transnational activity in the region, and the correspondingly small percentage of women in industrial jobs. The oil economies chose a strategy that relied on oil, gas, and finance, thereby minimizing the use of labor force and offering few opportunities for women.

Equity and empowerment remain elusive for Saudi women when access to economic resources is reserved mainly for men. In Saudi Arabia, there continues to exist an exceedingly large population of underutilized labor- that is, women. Attention to ways and means of integrating women in development therefore remains a pressing item on the national agenda of Saudi Arabia. Policymakers must be persuaded of the positive payoff of investing in the education and employment of women: a more skilled work force, stabilized population growth, healthier children, more prosperous households, and an expanding tax base.

Social Changes and Women in Saudi Arabia

The term "development" in Third World countries has everywhere reduced the economic status of women, resulting in marginalization and impoverishment. The term "development" in Arab countries obscures the relations of exploitation, unequal distribution of wealth, and other disparities (not to mention environmental degradation) that ensue. In Saudi Arabia, the term "development" is obscured by sex-segregated occupational distribution and gender-based wage differentials, inadequate support structures for working mothers, unfair labor legislation pertaining to women, unhealthy work environments, and so on. Whether modernization and paid employment have resulted in an increase or a diminution of women's economic status continues to be a matter of debate in regions of the Third World as for Saudi Arabia. Some have argued that men's work and women's work are complimentary in nomadic communities, and that modernization reduces, marginalizes, and devalues women's work. Women of rural backgrounds; it is argued, suffered a decline in status; they lost the productive role they traditionally played in the pre-industrial economy as the goods they produced were replaced by imported or locally produced factory ones. Furthermore, Saudi women's dependence on men as intermediaries creates a situation that only increases their precarious economic position. Thus, patriarchal gender arrangements in Saudi Arabia constitute an intervening factor in the impact of development on women's status. A recent example of what seems to be an improvement is the introduction of government identification cards (ID) for women. It is a challenge to get the application form and fill it in as required. The second step is for the male guardian to allow the woman to have an ID. In many instances, the guardian's permission is a prerequisite before getting

government and private services. It is hard to grasp the rationale behind requiring a male guardian's permission for a woman to get her own ID!

In a patriarchal context, however, the effects of development on women's status vary by class and by region. Women are likely to have more options in an urban setting, whereas in rural areas patriarchal family arrangements limit their options. Moreover, the major beneficiaries of the development process will likely be middle and upper class women, even though national development, legal reforms, and especially public education will result in some mobility for women of other social classes. There can be no doubt that expanding education and employment opportunities have created a generation of Saudi women who are accustomed to working in the formal sector and indeed expect it. It should not be surprising that middle-class educated and employed women should be the ones agitating for more progressive social change-for women as women and for women as workers.

Women, patriarchy and the changing family.

The essential components of patriarchal structures in a Muslim society are the same as elsewhere. Shaheed stated that "women's subordination occurs at multiple levels in the structures of family and kinship, in state policies and programs, in the discourse of dictatorial and populist ideologies, and in the politics and policies of the new world order" (Afkhami, 1996, p. 78). Women are perceived first and foremost as wives and mothers, and gender segregation is customary. To earn status, women must marry and reproduce. Their husbands control their ability to work or travel and hold unilateral right

of divorce. Children belong to the husband's family and may be lost to the mother upon divorce. Family honor and good reputation – or the reverse, shame- rests mainly on the public behavior of women, thereby reinforcing the high degree of sex segregation in the society. This is often greatly at odds with the realities of women's lives and aspirations. The individual women though, by careful manipulation of her gender relations, often succeed in circumventing or casting aside the culturally accepted bonds, which diminish her life.

In their attempts to redefine their lives, Saudi women confront the obstacle of a social code that is presented – and commonly internalized – as having religious sanction. In reality, the frequency with which customs unconnected and sometimes contradictory to religious doctrine are practiced by communities as supposedly religious, is visible proof that attitudes towards and practices flowing from religion are determined as much by collective memories, existing social structures, and power relations as by doctrines. Most individuals do not, however, distinguish customs, practices, of attitudes from their faith and self-identification. Largely, therefore, Shaheed concluded that improving everyday reality is conditional on women's ability to distinguish their religious faith from the social customs that have become its symbolical representations (Afkhami, 1996).

Human rights activism since the Gulf War has also raised public discussion on interpretations of the rights of women as a group according to the shari'a. The rights of women in the shari'a are subject to shifting interpretations, and the range of interpretations can be clearly seen in the events that followed the women's driving demonstration that occurred on 6 November 1990, during the American military build-up

after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The demonstrators had articulated a feminist interpretation of rights accorded to women in the shari'a in a letter sent to Prince Salman, governor of Riyadh, before driving cars as a group to express their desire for an end to the ban on women driving. The letter refuted moral arguments against allowing women to drive, and noted that allowing it would remove the economic burden of having to hire a chauffeur and would facilitate their participation in the development of the country, which they argued, was compatible with Islam.

The contents of two competing petitions presented to the King by liberal thinkers and traditionalist with regard to women driving were unacceptable alternatives for the Saudi regime. The secular petition was impossible (even if the regime was attracted to its liberal philosophy), if only because the regime's own religious establishment backed the religious petition. In addition, conservative voices in opposition to Saudi policies and to the inundation of the country by Western culture had grown in volume and society as a whole had become more conservative. Dumato noted that the regime was therefore particularly "vulnerable to accusations of abrogating its claim to rule by shari'a and apply it to the spectrum of government operations without divesting itself of power in favor of the Ulama and turning the country away from the Western-oriented development agenda that has guided Saudi policy for the last 25 years" (Afkhami1996, p. 143). King Fahd's solution, coming after years of promising and then failing to deliver a written codification of laws, was a new Basic Law issued by royal order on 1 March 1992. The emphasis on shari'a in the Basic Law puts in writing some of the ambiguities regarding rights and legal authority that existed before. Article 1 reiterates the long-established principle that

the constitution of Saudi Arabia is God's Holy Book and His Prophet's Tradition (that is the Quran and the Hadith). The religious basis of Saudi rule is again confirmed in article 7, which states that the Quran and Hadith are the source of authority of the government, and that they are the arbiters of this law and all other laws.

From the standpoint of the rulers, the ambiguity of rights in the shari'a offers the flexibility needed to bend with the political wind, so that Islam can be evoked either to liberalize opportunities for women, or to levy new restrictions on them. Education, for women, for example, was begun in 1960 by government despite opposition, with the caveat that it would be within 'Islamic margins', that is, only for the purpose of training women for tasks regarded as suitable, such as nursing, teaching, and motherhood. When higher education brought women into the professions, 'Islamic margins' were broadened until maintaining sex segregation could be considered the boundary of their ability to work. In response, to rising conservative sentiment in the 1980s, however, Islamic margins were narrowed by government and women's ability to manage businesses, travel abroad to study, eat in a restaurant, or select any course of study was limited. On the other hand, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the Saudi government's decision to respond militarily, the regime recognized that civilian participation would be helpful in eliciting popular support for the war effort. The regime therefore obtained a fatwa (shari'a jurisdiction) from the Council of Senior Ulama approving the training of women as civil defense workers. In fact, Dumato noted, "had the efforts of the 2,000 Saudi women who subsequently entered civil defense training been required, their participation would have represented an unprecedented intrusion of women into male

public space and a departure from established definitions of 'Islamic margins" (Afkhami, 1996, p. 146). In 1994, the Council of Senior Ulama succeeded in forcing the Saudi government to withdraw its participation in the United Nations Population and Development Conference held in Cairo. At the top of the list of the objections was the conference 's call for 'freedom and equality between men and women and the total elimination of differences between them'.

Networking for Change: Women's Groups in Saudi Arabia

A group can be understood as a collection of individuals who interact with each other on a regular basis thereby shaping the identities each form of themselves and of others in the group. A social group constitutes therefore of people who see themselves and act as though they share some sort of common identity. Women everywhere have formed themselves into social groups to protest war, to mediate conflict to fight for a political voice or even to spearhead peace movements. Although women in the Middle East have been portrayed by Westerners either as silent shadows, or as helpless victims of suppressive customs and traditions unable to organize or form groups on their own and for themselves, the picture is gradually changing. The last decade, however, has seen an explosion of research and publications fully acknowledging women as persons in their own right, as political and economic actors who fend and struggle to allow women to form groups. Yet, there remains a resistance and hesitancy on the part of Middle Eastern governments to allow women to form groups. In addition, although a narrow range of women's associations, unions, and cooperatives do exist, these are most often created and

tightly organized by men for women. The free associations of women are notable by its glaring absence in most Middle Eastern countries (Chatty and Rabo, 1997).

In Saudi Arabia, the picture is different. Independent non-governmental women's groups are missing from the conservative state. Saudi Arabia seems to share hostility to independent women's groups. Such groups are considered threatening to conservative regimes because they challenge the state's rigid control of women. Rather, a semblance of what is customarily known as non-governmental organizations, are formed by female members of the royal family. These organizations are generally charitable in nature and provide an outlet for Saudi females to express their creative capacities in a well-contained as well as culturally appropriate environment.

Formal and informal groups.

Social groups are often categorized by social scientists as primary or secondary. In primary groups such as families, or members of a household, there is, in principle, face-to-face interaction between all the members. In secondary groups, most members are linked to each other through more complex organizational relationships. Groups can also be classified as formal or informal. The difference between the two is not always easy to determine. A formal group is usually perceived by social scientists to be fairly stable over time. An informal group, in contrast, is seen as less stable with few or no stated rules. From the point of view of the members, however, "membership may be felt as exceedingly binding" (Chatty and Rabo, 1997, p. 9)

In Saudi Arabia, primary group affiliation has been extremely strong but secondary groups have not been formed yet. However, the increasing global

interconnectedness among women in new and different ways has weakened to some degree the strong familial connection. The scope of links between women without face-to-face interaction has dramatically increased. Social categories in cyber groups are coming to form and they are gradually regarding themselves as social groups. Global associations and organizations are also being formed by outsiders for a collection of individuals. These individuals, initially perhaps without a sense of collectivity, common identity, or action, may develop into a social group once they begin to interact. It is critical for researchers on women's development in the Middle East to study these new trends and focus their inquiries and analyze the wider social context of group formation processes.

The Impact of social and economic factors on women's group formation.

In Saudi Arabia, alliances between women across regional, educational, and economic barriers are also more prevalent. Yet, the very lack of any functioning political and economic system has opened up creative opportunities for women's informal groups. It is also worth looking briefly at an area important to the future development of women in the region: information. Women could exercise quite effective control over information in traditional society. In fact, the media is one field in the modern Saudi Arabia where women work in large numbers. Saudi women journalists are not restricted to women's issues, but cover general features and economic and political stories. Furthermore, the number of Saudi women's magazines has multiplied a dozen-fold during the last decade of the century. Many modern publications are consumer-oriented, and focus on fashion and family, but even the consumer magazines often carry serious

articles on women. However, in spite of these signs of growing interest in women's issues, it cannot be said that Saudi women have yet developed effective sources of power in the modern age. One of the major obstacles that all women's groups face is the reluctance of women, even those who are from believers in equal rights. These women believe that "the achievement of any outstanding rights should be left to the 'natural process' of social change. Many women also believe that the Arab world's problems are primarily political and economic, such as the conflict with Israel and the struggle for democracy, and that social questions, such as equal rights for women, should take second place" (Hijab, 1989, p. 163). Meanwhile, even women who do not believe that there has to be a serious and persistent campaign for women's rights do not want to segregate themselves in women's groups to do so. They prefer to work through the government and the political process to do so. In this state of affairs, networking as a technique for political change becomes even more valuable.

Networking and cultural maturity.

In Saudi Arabia, like most of the modern-nation states of the Middle East, women have been and continue to be manipulated to symbolically represent the cultural integrity of the dominant culture in the country. Women's lives are situated in a complex web of influence that derive from personal and political developments, cultural and structural environments, and local, national, and international concerns. At any given time, this web of influences determines for the individual women what is probable, possible, or out of bounds. Shaheed asserts that it is in the light of their knowledge and experience of

these multiple factors that Muslim women have devised their strategies for survival (Afkhami, 1996).

However, when women form groups there appears to be little scope for interpretation. Women in formal groups are only acceptable when they conform to the cultural ideals established by the state. In Saudi Arabia, women are only permitted to form groups, which are charitable organizations, concerned with the welfare of women and their children particularly children who are disabled or handicapped. Any other forms of associations-including self-help groups, income generating cooperatives, and professional skilled volunteer teams are often prohibited by law. Clearly, when women organize themselves into groups they are perceived as a threat to the male dominated power structure of the state.

Perhaps the most interesting example of networking and of maturity at the social and cultural level is that of the charitable organizations that spread across the kingdom in the 1980s. Prominent female members of the royal family established charitable organizations across the Kingdom in an attempt to support Saudi females in need of help. These charitable organizations were part of the Ministry of Social Affairs. These social service agencies worked closely with government policy, effectively acting as an arm of the government and avoided taking a stand on controversial issues that the government did not wish to tackle. Essentially, their activities were controlled and monitored by the men who ran the Ministry. Women in these agencies concentrated on welfare and on improving women's positions through literacy campaigns and vocational training, mostly handicrafts. Literacy classes, the basics of hygiene, cooking and home keeping were also

provided. By the late 1980s, women were encouraged to move into the field of caring for the handicapped and disabled. A number of these government-run women's associations opened centers for handicapped children and their mothers.

<u>**Seeking other venues for change.**</u>

It is believed that Saudi Arabia is about to take off. It is going to take off for the simple reason that everybody, with the fundamentalists in the lead, wants change. "The fact that they propose to go forward by going backward doesn't alter the fact that they ardently want change" (Mernissi, 1993, p. 149).

Education for women in the patriarchal belt has had a rapid and revolutionary impact towards the end of the 20th century. Mernissi states that "access to education seems to have an immediate, tremendous impact on women's perception of themselves, their reproductive and sex roles, and their social mobility expectations. The rapid social change-the impact of industrialization, urbanization, and education on marriage, the family, and sex roles-has caused a conservative backlash in the form of Islamist movement. According to Mernissi, fundamentalism is a "defense mechanism against profound changes in both sex roles and the touchy subject of sexual identity (Moghadam, 1993, p. 130). Fundamentalists are concerned that education for women has dissolved traditional arrangements of space segregation, family ethics, and sex roles. Education seems to have been a more important variable than employment in changing the position and self-perception of women in general. Education, while still limited, has been extended to many more Saudi women than has formal employment.

Networking for Change: Women's Groups in Saudi Arabia

Moreover, the Internet is playing an increasingly important and perhaps even liberating role for women in Saudi Arabia in the 21st century. Unofficial statistics suggest that two-thirds of Internet users in Saudi Arabia are women (Teitelbaum, 2002). Most Saudi women access the web from home to discuss many different topics including Islam, social issues, and the family. They avoid public Internet terminals in an attempt to avoid the searching eyes of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a kind of religious police, which had shut down such arrangements in the past. The Internet has opened up an entirely new arena for gathering information and for socializing, and one does not have to leave the house in order to do this. Young Saudi women are increasingly turning to chat rooms to discuss issues such as why women are forbidden to drive, and why the sexes must remain segregated. One can be anonymous in chat rooms, and this encourages frankness about issues that would be difficult under other circumstances. It should be noted that discussion of political and social issues are not the main use of the Saudi Internet. It is entertainment and dating. While the government tries to reflect and enforce the conservative tribal values of the society and restrict this space, it cannot really do so. For years, young men and women have had to meet clandestinely or through parental mediation, but the Internet affords a new, anonymous space for meeting the opposite sex, and the temptation is great.

In summary, Saudi Arabia is struggling with the implications of globalization's main vehicle, the Internet. It wants to be part of the "new economy," but it also wants to keep its unique heritage insulated from what it sees will be the untoward effects of the internet. The Internet is thus both an opportunity and a challenge. Even without the

Internet, Saudi women are exposed daily to that other vehicle of globalization, satellite television.

Indeed, the rise in conservative sentiment and the vulnerability of the Saudi regime to internal criticism suggest that the flexibility offered in the shari'a is unlikely to work to the benefit of women in the immediate future. Rather, the changing realties of daily life such as the increasing opportunities in employment, education and civic activities, global mass media, and literature of Saudi women writers, that have emerged towards the end of the first millennium will continuously challenge Saudi society's conceptualization of women.

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