

Fundamentalism and Women's Rights

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).

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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,

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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

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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

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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 years.

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

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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,

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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

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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.

The hijab, the veil.

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

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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

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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.

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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" (Afkhami 1996, 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

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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

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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'.

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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

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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

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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

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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

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these multiple factors that Muslim women have devised their strategies for survival (Afkhani, 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

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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.

Seeking other venues for change.

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.

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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

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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 realities 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.