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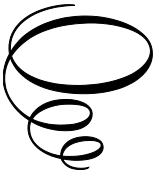

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INTRODUCTION

It took a long time for this work to be published in book form and I am pleased that it is finally able to be enjoyed by the public and academia. This book is basically a vivid documentation of women's status and the social change taking place between the years 2012 and 2015 and for which the social and cultural context has to be taken into consideration. I can proudly say that the first results of the process of change described in this work are being witnessed right now. However, the process of producing such a work on what is an always controversial topic was incredibly challenging due to the sensitivity and the fast pace of change in Saudi Arabia during the writing process. The role of women in Saudi Arabia has already reached another level of empowerment at all levels and in all sectors in ways that were not expected during the time this research took place. Yet the link between women and NGOs in Saudi has been a rich and underexplored area up to now, which was one of the main reasons I felt obligated to publish this work. In fact, this is still a relevant and necessary area of research, especially in relation to NGOs and how their work is affecting women's empowerment in Saudi. The link between NGOs and women needs more attention and I personally noticed the level of interest in this issue during a recent presentation on women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia. After I presented a piece about women's empowerment and NGOs during a conference in early 2018, I received a lot of requests and discussions about the issue. Shortly after this conference, I decided that I was under an obligation to publish my work on NGOs and make what I believe to be a unique addition to the existing literature. Publishing this work is a dream come true and I hope it offers something to every person who reads it and becomes a reference point for future research.

Through an exploratory mixed-methods investigation, this book explores the strategies adopted by Saudi NGOs to promote women's empowerment. The study looks at fourteen NGOs based in the city of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, which is one of the most modern and advanced cities in the country (Coleman, 2010; Al-Rasheed, 2013; Thomson, 2014). The complex and unique nature of Saudi society required a sensitive approach to be taken by the researcher in investigating the controversial issue of women's empowerment.

This study has aimed to identify the practices and tactics that NGOs have used in order to negotiate the conservative nature of Saudi society and promote women's empowerment through their activities. The NGO strategies investigated include: the use of guests and events; the media; religion; the framing of women's issues; and the building of alliances. Each strategy has its own dynamics, which are explained in detail. This investigation into women's empowerment in NGOs was guided by the following questions:

- What are the strategies that Saudi NGOs use for women's empowerment?
- What roles do these strategies play in women's empowerment in NGOs?
- What factors influence preferences regarding the particular strategies that are adopted to promote women's empowerment in NGOs?
- To what extent are the strategies used by Saudi NGOs for empowering women effective?

This research followed a mixed methods design consisting of interviews, document analysis, and a survey. Qualitative data was collected from three main sources with each selected NGO. Firstly, data was collected from official documents, including yearbooks, reports, statistical reports, brochures, and other NGO publications. The second and primary type of data was generated from semi-structured interviews with female NGO managers, planners, and founders. A third method—the questionnaire survey—was employed to increase the reliability of the findings and the number of responses.

Understanding the history of the current Saudi cultural context is also essential because it sets the scene within which women's reforms have been and continue to be made. Due to Saudi Arabia's patriarchal and conservative nature, women have largely been absent from the public sphere being restricted to their homes and other informal gatherings (Chatty and Rabo, 1997). The first demands made by and on behalf of Saudi women were for the right to education. This began when many families in the western part of the country (known as Alhijaz) started sending their daughters to other Arab countries for study. This was soon followed by requests for the provision of girls' schools within Saudi Arabia and two schools for girls were approved in Jeddah in the 1960s (Hamadan, 2005). Although the number of schools approved for girls was initially very low, this initiative was significant as it generated demand for education for girls around the country. However, many conservatives, including the religious authorities,

have expressed strong opposition to such demands. The Saudi government has had to carry out a number of negotiations between the religious authorities and families in order to allow girls to attend schools, as many families refused to let their daughters go to school. Ultimately, girls' education became a legitimate area for reform regarding women. Most importantly—as this book suggests—a number of aspects of girls' education had to be approved in cultural and religious terms, and restrictions were implemented, such as the segregation of sexes and the requirement that consent be obtained from male guardians. In addition, up to 2001, the head of girls' education had to be a religious authority figure (Hamdan, 2005). Negotiations with religious authorities over what is suitable for girls' educations have taken place since and these laid the foundations that are shaping ongoing negotiations. This tangible relationship between religion and women in Saudi Arabia influences most reform initiatives and proposed changes regarding women's rights, roles, and statuses. Huband (2009) argues that nowadays the ideological justifications that dominated the Saudi context are becoming less convincing in the face of the modernisation of the country. However, Islam still plays major role in the advancement of any social progress and for women in particular.

Although women's welfare associations were established in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s, along with women's education, the activities of women have remained largely hidden to the public (Devriese, 2008; Montagu, 2010). Recently, however, an increasing number of NGOs have emerged that have sought to challenge the traditional conception of women's associations within the region as being solely for charitable purposes. Furthermore, globalisation, particularly through the Internet and social media, has become very influential in changing Saudi society in general and women's organisations in particular (Glosemeyer, 2004: 145). In other words, education, Western influences, government reforms, and the Internet have generated major changes in the activities and appearances of women in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi women, however, not only face obstacles from the state, but also from social constraints and sometimes even their fellow women. As Abu-Khaled (2009: 109) notes, the stereotypical image of women is rooted in the "collective emotional memory" of the mind-sets of both men and women. Attempts to tackle discrimination against women have been addressed though the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Saudi Arabia has signed and which has become a pressure point for the government. Although the recent reforms in Saudi Arabia have led to fewer constraints being placed

on women, women that work for NGOs regularly have to negotiate with state officials, the public, and the community in order to carry out services on behalf of their NGOs. Understanding this negotiation process is crucial to understanding the dynamics of women's NGOs, irrespective of whether their negotiations are intentionally carried out by women or not (Devriese, 2008; Jad, 2004). While many concerns have been raised by Western countries concerning the status of Saudi women, many women in domestic NGOs have utilised their positions to mobilise particular strategies to address women's issues (Dawson, 1998; Devriese, 2008; Jad, 2004, Ottaway, 2005; Staudt, 2005). This research addresses issues concerning how women in such organisations arrange their activities and resources in order to advance female empowerment and, furthermore, how they push for policies that favour women by using existing religious and cultural norms.

> By dint of their academic, professional, and economic successes, they are quietly breaking down their country's pervasive discriminatory policies and social attitudes (Isobel Coleman, 2010: 205).

It is also very important to take into account the government's changing policy towards women's empowerment through the implementation of different policies in order to integrate women into the national development plan. This change has been greatly influenced by the country signing up to the Millennium Development Goals, which are being used indicators of and guidance for women's empowerment (http://www.mep.sa.gov).

In Saudi Arabia, the issue of women's empowerment has gained international attention in recent years, but to increase women's participation as active members within the complex social context of the region is not without its challenges. Women in Saudi Arabia have been the centre of reforms taking place in the country. As Nabulsi (2009: 165) describes it, "Saudi women are the Kingdom's most powerful and emotive political football. Their situation is a benchmark of how far, fast and in what direction the Kingdom is moving". While there is a body of scholarship that explores empowerment more generally, and women's NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) in other countries, little research has been carried out on the specific strategies that women's NGOs in Saudi Arabia adopt to increase activism and participation in their activities. Nowadays, NGOs are increasingly working as "catalysts for social change", especially in promoting empowerment through their activities (Elbers et al., 2014: 1).

The literature on empowerment and NGOs in other developing countries does not match the Saudi context, as it focuses mostly on issues relating to poverty. However, many studies on gender and patriarchal societies were

useful for developing a better understanding of the factors affecting women's rights and empowerment in Saudi Arabia. An analysis of the role of religion, in particular, has yielded a number of insights into how women's NGOs operate in Saudi Arabia. The first step of the investigation involved selecting an appropriate context for the study. NGOs were selected as an appropriate place to investigate women's empowerment, as the promotion of women's empowerment is well-represented in their objectives and activities. Montagu (2010) describes civil society in Saudi Arabia as "surprisingly under-researched and somewhat unrecognizable" (67).

The theoretical framework of the study also drew on studies that combine NGO work and women's empowerment, such as Joachim (2003) who provides insight into the tactics that NGOs use to influence policy and mobilise resources in their favour. This study captures the negotiation process that NGOs undertake in their advocacy work on women's rights and describes how they frame issues relating to such rights in order to push their agendas and gain access and support for them. It offers insight into the backstage operations of NGOs and the different steps, processes of advocacy, and criteria they use to advocate for and lobby on particular issues. Although this study has not necessarily captured the practicalities of working in a specific context, it has captured the negotiations and strategies used to influence decision-making on issues of women's empowerment. This research is qualitative in nature because it is based on a theoretical framework that explains NGOs mobilising structures as tools for influencing political action through a framing process of presenting problems; offering solutions; and providing justifications for policy interventions. In fact, Joachim's study offers a detailed explanation of the dynamic nature of women's NGOs, focusing on political opportunities, the framing process, and the strategic plans that influence agendas regarding women's issues (Joachim, 2003). This research uses Joachim's (2003) study as a point of focus, along with numerous other studies (Moghadam and Senftova, 2005; Kabeer, 2005; Abu-Rabia-Queder, 2007; Paterson, 2008), including some that identify indicators of women's empowerment in NGOs in Saudi Arabia (Shalaby, 2008; Montagu, 2010; Afif, 2009). However, these studies provide different explanations and reasons for the dynamics of women's NGOs, with some focusing on the dynamics of NGOs in relation to women's empowerment in particular. In order to create an index of categories and indicators that can be used as a guideline throughout this fieldwork, the researcher combined information from all these sources regarding the work that NGOs carry out on women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

In Saudi Arabia, social change has affected all aspects of life, including women's positions and statuses. The specific historical, political, and social dimensions are essential to the understanding of ongoing social change in Saudi Arabia (Thomson, 2014). It is important to consider the distinct character of the country in order to appreciate the cultural differences that exist within the various regions of Saudi Arabia because such differences are pronounced and critical to studying social change. Currently, with the reform initiatives taking place within the country and the increasing demands of globalisation, it is impossible to avoid the social changes that have been observed by society (Metcalfe, 2008). Women now contribute to Saudi society at many professional levels, yet they still face cultural restrictions in their daily lives (Demuto, 2005; Coleman, 2010). Moreover, changes regarding women are considered by many in Saudi Arabia to be the result of modernity projects led by Westerners (Karam and Afioni, 2014). Shaw (2006: 41) describes this as a "feeling of erosion of important values within an ancient culture thrown on the defensive" and notes that the majority of research conducted in Saudi Arabia has focused on issues surrounding oil and economics. In contrast, little research has been conducted on cultural and social issues by Western academics and more attention is needed to understand these social changes.

A report by Human Rights Watch (September, 2010: 1) notes that a number of changes have taken place for women, including a "loosening [of] the rigid segregation between men and women in public places reflecting changes in social attitudes". However, the report also highlights the continuing violations of women's rights that are taking place, including the lacklustre efforts by the government to combat domestic violence and limited legislative attempts to establish equal rights. However, after the implementation of the new Saudi Vision 2030 programme, launched in 2017, the issue of women's empowerment has been targeted as a major concern of the government. Issues concerning women are those with religious and social aspects, but

have not been reinforced through political changes in Saudi society. This chapter discusses the historical context of social change in Saudi Arabia by identifying the factors that have influenced change and the extent to which social change has affected different areas of society. It also sheds light on the status of women in Saudi Arabia and their presence in major areas of social life, including education, employment, legislation, and civil society organizations.

The Historical and Cultural Context

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which covers most of the Arabian Peninsula, was established in 1932. Saudi Arabia's establishment led to the transformation of its people from members of independent and unsettled tribes to being ruled by an "autocratic monarchy" (Pool, 2005: 295). With the unification of the western region known as Alhijaz and the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the country came to be held in great respect by Muslims, with the government relying on pilgrims as a major source of income (Pool, 2005). In 1936, the discovery of oil in the east brought massive economic opportunities. During the oil boom of 1970, oil production doubled and wealth poured into the country (Pool, 2005). It was at this time that major development plans took shape to ensure that resources were appropriately used to meet the country's needs. However, its dependency on oil made the country vulnerable in many ways and despite oil still being considered to be a great advantage to the country, its influence was not without some seemingly undesirable consequences for its citizens. As Pool (2005) argues, the renting of oil fields in return for income had certain political and social consequences for the country, for example, the government does not tax its citizens and welfare, health, and education are all free. In return, the citizens do not make claims on the government (Pool, 2005: 291; Shaw, 2005).

According to Thomson (2014), Saudi Arabia's sources of legitimacy are religious and socio-traditional ones that represent the religious and tribal elites from whom the government seeks its support and constituency. Saudi society is a patriarchal one in which Islam is the dominant ideology, but kinship and tribalism also remain primary features of this society (Thomson, 2014). The social structure in Saudi society, as Al-Rumaihi (2008: 224) has explained, relies largely on the tribe and the extended family, which can become, at times, a challenge to "modern democratic values". This is also noted by Maisel (2013), who argues that tribal influences are considered to be "an obstacle in the development of a modern society" (285). He adds

that, despite efforts to exclude the concept of the tribe from the process of nation building in Saudi Arabia, tribal practices are still obviously present in many areas of public life (Maisel, 2013). The tribe continues to play a major role in Saudi life and regularly contributes directly to decision-making, as the tribal leader and man of the family are in charge of the affairs of the tribe. This tribal structure has a hierarchal system of male dominance, which gives great power and privilege to males over females (Willoughby, 2011). However, the progress of women in society is heavily predicated on the supportive role of their extended families and many successful women have benefited from family support in their lives (Welsh et al., 2014).

Historically, the elite tribes had control over civil society and any reforms had to be made from the top down (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007). Moreover, the ruling tribal leaders in the Arabian Peninsula used to have well-established power and authority in the region and developed regional support structures to maintain their positions (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007). Therefore, changes to civil society could not be implemented unless these tribal leaders chose to do so. In protecting itself against possible challenges, civil society had the power to introduce changes, but lacked the power to implement changes to the political agenda. In other words, political constraints on civil society organisations limited their ability to produce effective reforms or enhance social mobility (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007: 915).

More recently, the reform of the oil monarchies (in the Persian Gulf) has been undertaken in the service of certain agendas. This reform was driven by internal and external pressures for civil society to have a greater role within these countries, especially given the wider effect of globalisation. These agendas include the aims the leaders of these countries use to achieve greater legitimacy (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007: 916). From the beginning of his reign in 2005, King Abdullah initiated major reforms across the government and the changing demands of globalisation increased the country's readiness for such reforms. Despite the King's efforts to promote reforms, conservative religious leaders (ulama) have continued to exert their influence by inhibiting them. As Hamilton (2010: 3) has argued, reform in the conservative kingdom of Saudi Arabia involves negotiation between conservative and liberal reformers in which both parties seek to legitimise their claims or agendas in terms of Shari'ah law (Al-Rasheed, 2013: 17). Pool (2005: 290) also notes that the government of Saudi Arabia has struggled to maintain a balance between "liberal-reformist and Islamic orthodox [groups]", which emerged as a result of the changes to civil society. Ultimately, for these reforms to be successful, they have to be

facilitated through an Islamic framework, as this dominant ideology is the key to any change (Thomson, 2014: 25).

As noted above, the tribal patriarchal nature of Saudi society determines the kind of reforms and changes that can be accepted and welcomed. With rapid change around the world, Saudi Arabia has found itself at the middle of this accelerating process of change, caught between embracing it, while maintaining its identity. It is critical to understand the added dimension of the Saudi mentality in which explaining behaviors and attitudes from the point of view of religion is not adequate and the tribal and patriarchal nature is more dominant and has gained power with the support of religious justification. This patriarchal nature is not only about the system of male dominance, but also about a hierarchical system that works downwards from the top to the bottom, from the eldest to the youngest, from the elites to the common people, and from men to women.

Factors Associated with Social Change

As mentioned in the previous section, many interrelated factors influence social change, some coming from outside the country and some from within. Saudi society is being transformed at every level, and the rooted cultural values that have dominated for so long have recently been shaken (Al-Dakhil, 2009: 59). Change is occurring in Saudi Arabia, "in a diverse manner and at varying speed" and, in order to study this change, it is important to understand the sociopolitical context, as well as the different external and internal issues related to it (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007: 914).

Each factor has brought a new wave of change. Firstly, as already noted, the oil boom in the mid-1970s was one of the main causes of social change in Saudi Arabia. With the support of rapid development plans, Saudi Arabia experienced a leap towards modernity and this period brought substantial economic, social, educational, and infrastructural changes (Fakhro, 2005). Another factor contributing to change was the Gulf War of 1990, which brought with it a growing political awareness and openness to other nations (Hamdan, 2005). According to Ehteshami and Wright (2007: 913), the Gulf War not only placed an "economic burden on the oil-rich monarchies, but also fostered a new spirit of political activism within the civil society across the region". More specifically, Western presence in Saudi Arabia has generated voices calling for change from both traditional conservatives and liberals.

The tragic attacks of September 11, 2001 had a significant impact on social change globally and in Saudi Arabia in particular. The Saudi government became aware of the urgent need to implement political, social, cultural, and economic reforms (Raphaeli, 2005: 517). A great amount of attention was directed at the country and external pressures for reform were imposed on Saudi Arabia's government by the United States. In addition, growing numbers of reformists from both the liberal and conservative factions also began demanding reforms (Ehteshami and Wright, 2007; Raphaeli, 2007). Consequently, the Saudi government took immediate action within the country and planned other changes to take place following 2001. Some of these changes were publically announced and took place immediately after 9/11, including the regulation and monitoring of religious speeches in mosques and the requirement for more moderate speeches to be made, promoting a moderate version of Islam and denouncing extremist ways of thinking (Raphaeli, 2005; Thomson, 2014). In addition, charity organisations had to be regulated and supervised by the Ministry of Social Affairs. For example, the ministry banned the collection of unauthorised public money for charitable reasons (Montague, 2011). In relation to education, the curricula and religious matters were immediately edited to remove any content that was extreme or hostile to the West. As Hamdan (2006: 56) states, "the events of 9/11 brought to light again and more powerfully than ever before the issue of women's rights in Saudi society". She also argues that, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Saudi religious education system, and the Saudi educational system in general, received a lot of criticism.

Domestically, the government has also faced the threat of violence from extremist groups within the country. These groups have planned terrorist attacks inside Saudi Arabia and have used violence as a tool against "non-believers", including other Westernised Saudis (Raphaeli, 2005). Haynes (2005) explains that all religions have fundamentalist groups that develop concerns about social and political issues in their communities by focusing on the fear that "secular forces" are threatening their way of life. Only a small number of attacks have been observed inside Saudi Arabia, although many more have been planned, but discovered and stopped by Saudi officials. Therefore, the problem is complex and, in addition to the security issues that these groups present, the government is also concerned by the ideology they promote and the effect they have on younger generations, as this will have a direct impact on youth groups and may lead to extremist thinking amongst them (Haynes, 2005: 94). In addition, the authority of the religious police was weakened by the government soon after 9/11 (Hamdan, 2006; Raphaeli, 2005).

In attempt to tackle extremist thinking, the Saudi government established the National Dialogue in 2003. Through this process, debates on issues concerning citizens are hosted in a series of annual and semi-annual meetings that address urgent problems or issues facing the country (Thomson, 2014; El-Fassi 2014). This was principally to address the problem of terrorism in a public forum. The King addressed the issue of terrorism through the media, providing extremists with criminal records with a chance to give themselves up and come back to moderate ways of thinking. Issues that were previously considered taboo are now being discussed publicly through the National Dialogue. For example, the third National Dialogue was entitled 'The Rights of Women' (Nonneman, 2008; Thomson, 2014; Raphaeli, 2005; El-Fassi, 2014). Nonetheless, all the reforms initiatives under the National Dialogue still have to be made from within an Islamic framework, within which any attempt to make social change must take place (Coleman, 2010; Thomson, 2014).

The National Dialogue's aim of bringing citizens together to debate important social and development issues, such as education, work, women's rights, unemployment, and extremist thinking, has been appreciated by the public. The National Dialogue also allows women to participate in its discussions. Although it does not allow them to be in the same room as the men, they discuss their issues and their comments are publicly announced in the meetings. This constitutes a new way in which women's views are integrated into the public discussion of issues of concern to all citizens. Numerous studies about Saudi Arabia have referred to the National Dialogue as a primary channel between the government and its citizens (Hamilton, 2010; Le Renard, 200; Montague, 2011; Thomson, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2010). The National Dialogue remains largely an expressive tool, but has also become a legitimate channel for citizens to express criticism on areas of concern.

The media has played an essential role in social change in Saudi Arabia. The voice of reform comes from educated Saudis who are pushing for changes to be implemented in different areas in the country and the media has become their main tool for encouraging and influencing internal change. Hamdan (2006) argues that the press has been granted more freedom than it previously had, with Saudi columnists being increasingly able to criticise the performance of the public sector. This, according to Hamdan (2006), is a "great relief for both men and women who have long felt deprived of freedom of speech. Both women and men are hopeful for signs of slow but steady change occurring in the country". Human Rights Watch (2010) also

agrees that a growing number of Saudi activists are discussing issues on the Internet and advocating for change.

As mentioned earlier, Saudi Arabia initiated a number of reforms prior to 9/11. However, these reforms became better facilitated and implemented after Abdullah became king in 2005, initiating reforms inside Saudi Arabia to complement the actions he had already taken as crown prince (Thomson, 2014). The reforms, as Human Rights Watch (2010: 1) notes, have focused on four major areas: "women's rights, freedom of expression, judicial fairness and religious tolerance". To improve political participation, the government launched the first municipal elections in 2005, which drew international attention, with half of the 12,000 seats being elected in 178 municipal councils (Nonneman, 2008).

The most recent wave of change took place in 2016 when the Kingdom announced and adopted significant and influential reforms, the impact of which spread to all public and private sectors. These reforms were part of the Saudi Vision 2030 and the programme is still being used by the government to enforce reform; as a result, its impact has been felt at all levels of the country. Vision 2030 has been translated into detailed requirements for all sectors of government and has provided a means of measuring progress and ensuring the implementation of reforms in each sector. However, this new Saudi vision was influenced and inspired by the United Nations' Millennium Agenda, following specific international guidelines that, in effect, made it easy to follow-up in all sectors. The new government is very keen on standardizing both the public and private sectors with new legislation and standards to ensure the modernization of the country; so far it has succeeded in shifting the old traditional ways and encouraging a modern professional approach (https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/).

Women's Status in Saudi Arabia

A large portion of the recent political, economic, and social reforms in Saudi Arabia have concerned women (Islam, 2014). Saudi women have unique and complex characteristics and therefore any analysis of the status of women in Saudi Arabia must consider the fact that certain measures cannot be found elsewhere. As Coleman notes, the status of women in Saudi Arabia has many contrasts and there are many highly distinguished professional women. However, they "enjoy fewer legal rights than any other women in any country in the world" (Coleman, 2010: 205). Despite the many restrictions faced by Saudi women, many of the reform efforts have been directed towards them and Saudi women have proven their determination

by standing at the "forefront of social and economic change" (Coleman, 2010: 205).

Some gender empowerment measures commonly used in developing countries do not generate appropriate results when applied to Saudi women. For instance, economic and educational measures do not reflect a context-appropriate understanding of issues relevant to the development of equal status for women in Saudi Arabia. These cultural indicators, despite being imperfect cross-context measuring tools, nonetheless appear to represent the best ones available for assessing the equality of women in Saudi Arabia (Moghadam and Senftova, 2005). An important development for women in Saudi Arabia took place in the year 2000, when the government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Although it also included restrictions in some areas, it still generated a lot of objections from conservatives and academics (Demuto, 2005: 261; Islam, 2014; Metcalfe, 2011). This development has led to systematic changes in government policy on women's issues in order to comply with the convention.

Despite the government taking this crucial step, Karam and Afioni (2014) argue that numerous reports show that Saudi women are still suffering from restrictions that result from "patriarchal biases embedded within cultural, religious and legislative tradition" (Karam and Afioni, 2014: 506). As Metcalfe puts it, "cultural practices [still] inhibit women's participation" and deeply embedded practices impact on women's effective involvement in society (Metcalfe, 2011: 133). In addition, for many conservatives, the convention is predicated on a Western social model. As Al-Sarrani and Alghamdi (2014) argue, not only is Western feminism not suitable for explaining gender issues in Saudi Arabia, but it has also triggered a great deal of suspicion about applying Western models within Saudi society. For instance, according to Hamdan (2005), the Council of Senior Scholars, made up of conservative religious scholars, wished to withdraw from the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994 due to what they considered to be violations of Islamic beliefs contained in the proposals made, such as promoting the use of birth control and abortion.

As noted, women in Saudi Arabia are at the centre of a conflict between the conservative and progressive interpretations of what is written about women in the Qur'an and any reforms regarding women face conservative religious opposition. As Doumato (1999) argues, conservative elements have constructed the image of an "ideal women" based on the traditionally

assigned role of bringing up children and looking after the home. She explains that, although this ideology has been constructed by conservative religious scholars, it has also been stressed by the state and incorporated into public policy. This outlook has been at the core of the state's dedication to protecting Islamic morality and values under the norm of male guardianship (Doumato, 1999: 187).

Approaching women's issues in Saudi Arabia is closely associated with Islamic discourse and, in fact, this approach will be more effective than addressing women's issue without any Islamic justification. Islamic feminism concerns the way women and others interpret Islam to justify progress, eliminate discrimination, and claim their rights within the purview of Islamic teaching. This philosophy is also based from the fact that many Muslim women believe in the inherent justice of Islam towards women and all practices against women are interpreted according to cultural and social realities. However, Islamic feminism is an approach that has many aspects and approaches, depending on the contexts in which it operates. Interestingly, in Saudi Arabia the term has not yet been fully embraced, but it is effectively in use. Regardless of the label attached to it, women in Saudi Arabia are, intentionally or unintentionally, using Islamic discourses to justify social progress in society. Moreover, with the widespread rejection of Western feminism, whilst practically in use, the notion of Islamic feminism is not welcomed as it has been with the West (El-Saadi, 2014; Grami, 2014). Because of the fine line being trodden, the term Islamic feminism is not well defined and can be confusing.

Feminism, in general, is an approach that developed in the West as women sought to claim equality; it has proven its impact globally using the most appropriate and effective means. Muslim women are also keen to use similar approaches, but within the framework of Islam, as they are convinced of its justice. Anwar (2014) argues that that it is possible to define liberation within the framework of Islam and Muslim women are increasingly demanding justice and the elimination of discriminatory practices in the name of Islam by critically studying the Qur'an and fiqh (Anwar, 2014). Davids (2015) offers Badran's (2009) argument of Islamic feminism as a "fundamental alteration towards an egalitarian Islam, which in fact makes it distinctly different from secular feminism"; according to Badran, "Islamic feminism is an interpretation of Islam and gender using 'ijtihad' [independent analysis] of the Qur'an and religious texts" (Davids, 2015: 313). "Islamic feminism critically examines Qur'an and the Sunnah and Al hadith [the saying and acts of Prophet Muhammad] and the fiqh [jurisprudence]. However, the dilemma facing such philosophy is that the

fact Muslim women continue to be marginalised due to the fact that, in many situations the public space is 'predominantly' defined by the male interpretation of Islam" (Davids, 2015: 314). Islamic feminism is seen to represent a threat to the privilege men enjoy in patriarchal societies. Moreover, many women oppose it because it suggests changes to gender roles in society (Grami, 2014: 325).

In Saudi Arabia, Islamic feminism while not welcomed is paradoxically used in every claim of women rights there. According to Fakhro (2005), Saudi Arabia is a country with deeply structured traditions and norms that are intertwined with every aspect of a person's life; many of these traditions date back to before the rise of Islam. As a religion, Islam praises good values and norms and encourages behaviours that fit with them, while banning and discouraging other practices. Some of these concern the status of women. In Arab culture, women were traditionally considered to be part of "household things" and it was only later that Islam gave them rights, as explicitly stated in the Quran. During the earlier Islamic period, women were pioneers in several fields, but many Arabs considered them to be weaker beings in need of the protection of men (Fakhro, 2005). Arabian society has, for centuries—before the existence of Saudi Arabia as a country—been patriarchal. Men dominate public life, while women mostly remain inside their homes or in female-only places.

Traditionally, the roles and statuses of women in Arab-Bedouin cultures were well-defined and related to their membership of an elite family or tribe, then, after marriage, to their ability to bear children, especially boys, as this would add to their status within the family (Abou-Rabia-Queder, 2007). With the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia, however, major changes occurred that affected the whole social structure. Bedouin tribes were encouraged to settle in large Bedouin settlements, which led to a complete change in lifestyle. After the oil boom of the 1970s, there was a vast increase in the country's resources and people's incomes, with educational and employment opportunities also increasing significantly. Education came to be seen as favourable for both men and women and educational opportunities thus became widely available for women (Fakhro, 2005). Nevertheless, Fakhro (2005) also argues that many women did not consider work to be an essential step after completing their studies, because they had financial security with the increasing incomes of men.

In terms of social roles, men are seen as providing for their families in Saudi Arabia, while women take care of domestic duties and bring up the children. Protecting his family's honour is part of an Arabian man's duty and a

principle of male guardianship (Doumato, 1999). However, because men are responsible for providing for their families, this has created a tendency for Saudi women to be completely dependent on male support, not only financially, but also with regards to their conduct outside the home. This has created a lack of desire among women to acquire knowledge about their own rights and laws. In some cases, when a woman deals with real life challenges or loses her male guardian's support, she develops an independent life and acquires more knowledge concerning her legal rights. In addition, education has brought awareness and encouraged ambition in younger female generations, whose members often desire more independence. However, women who are more independent face greater challenges and constraints than average Saudi women do (Fakhro, 2005; Welsh et al., 2014).

These cultural conceptions are rooted in male and female behaviours and thoughts (Abu-Kaled, 2014). Specifically, Saudi women have not only adopted these cultural behaviours, but regularly enforce them, with women influencing their sons' attitudes and behaviours towards their own sisters. Moreover, women are often cautious in dealing with their own male relatives and spouses. For example, some women go to work while their husbands are at work, but come back to prepare lunch for them. Moreover, many working women do not ask for help from men to do the housework chores, instead hiring help for the house (Fakhro, 2005). However, Fakhro (2005) argues that working women face additional psychological and physical burdens in undertaking both the responsibilities of home and work, and suggests the importance of revising policies regarding working women in order to suit their new living conditions and their growing share of the workload in the labour market.

The concept of sex segregation has also played an important role in women's status. The principle of sex segregation has been adopted by society as a public policy and is even seen favourably by many women who prefer to enjoy greater freedom in "women only" places. According to Le Renard (2008: 614), sex segregation started in educational institutes under the influence of "official ulama" who introduced and "institutionalized the concept" in order to offer "legitimate public spaces for women"; this idea of segregation gradually extended throughout the country. In her study on sex segregation in Saudi Arabia, Le Renard (2008: 615) argues that the concept has been "re-invented" by women in the country. She contends that although sex segregation is often seen as a sign of the "repression" of women, women have also successfully used this concept to create their own

social category in Saudi Arabia and to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population.

Women in Saudi Arabia are the main subject of the ongoing discussion about reform and there has been noticeable progress in relation to female participation. Interestingly, the Human Development Report (2009) noted that Saudi Arabia is ranked as a highly developed country based on individual income. However, in the same report, Saudi Arabia ranks 106 out of 109 countries on the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which indicates whether women take an active part in economic and political life. This shows that, in spite of the obvious social changes, women still need to play more effective and active roles in the development of Saudi Arabia (Human Development Report, 2009). In 2004, three female academics were appointed to the Mujlis Al-Shura (Consultative Council) as advisors on women's and family issues (Doumato, 2005: 268) and Human Rights Watch (2010) refers to the symbolic gesture by King Abdullah, who posed for a photograph with 35 female participants of the National Dialogue. Le Renard (2008: 617) argues that familial and societal roles and the participation of women in Saudi society is no longer a "taboo" subject in Saudi Arabia and this issue has been discussed widely and publicly by government officials, ulama personalities, and male and female intellectuals. As recently as 2004, the National Dialogue on Women was considered to be the first public discussion of women's issues in Saudi Arabia and many Saudi women regard this dialogue as representing a major step forward (Le Renard, 2008: 617). At the beginning of 2013, thirty Saudi women were appointed to the Shura Council and now represent 20 % of its membership. This was a historic decision by King Abdullah because Saudi women had previously been excluded from the political scene in Saudi Arabia. The importance of this step should also be seen in relation to the role of this governmental body, which discusses laws and legislation and is consulted by the king and the government (http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/01/11/259877.html). Hatem (2014: 12) argues that, by appointing women to visible public positions, the government has taken control of the gender agenda and improved its reputation internationally. However, women still face many obstacles that prevent them from fully participating in the social development of the country, including a lack of motivation; a lack of information (many women simply do not know about their legal rights); and the cultural and social constraints that their families and public policies place upon them.

However, the symbolic move of finally allowing women to drive in September 2017 created a huge push for individuals and officials to respect

women in unprecedented ways. The "move" has had more of a mental and sentimental effect on both men and women. In my opinion, women driving on the streets for the first time made both sexes think and wonder about the nature of the relationship between men and women in Saudi Arabia and this relationship was tested and critically assessed. Surprisingly, letting women drive their own cars has not attracted hostility from society, but has been fully embraced and respected. However, the number of women who went out driving during the first year was very low due to the relatively low number of women holding driving licenses and because of the hesitation of many women who were waiting to see the result of this change. Now, in 2021, women driving has become normal and is treated as if it had been done forever. Moreover, it seems unusual for such issue to have such effect, but women driving was the last face of patriarchal control and it was simply removed one day by royal order. As such, it has its own legal and official procedure beside its hugely symbolic impact.

Education

Educational qualifications help determine the status of women. Being educated equates to higher status and being more highly valued by society (Fakhro, 2005). One of the first frames introduced to approach women's empowerment issues was education, as it is considered to provide a gateway for women's achievements (Metcalfe, 2011). In 1956, a proposal for the establishment of a private girls' school was introduced to King Faisal by Saddikh Sharafalden, supported by her father-in-law who was known for his passion for education. The permissions were issued and six months later Iffat Al Thunayan, King Faisal's wife, opened Dar Al Hanan Private School for Girls in Jeddah. At this time, in his attempt to legitimise his education reforms for girls, King Faisal managed to convince opposing religious leaders of the importance of education in general, and the importance of education for girls in particular, from a religious point of view (Coleman, 2010; Islam, 2014; El-Fassi, 2014). Before formal schools were opened, many families sent their children to schools in neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan (Hamdan, 2005). In 1960, the General Directorate for Female Education was established under the supervision of a commission of senior religious scholars and the number of public schools rose from 15 primary schools in 1960 to 34 women's educational administrations and 150 regional educational institutions by 1999 (Fakhro, 2005). In 2003, the General Directorate for Female Education was separated from the commission of religious scholars and a new female minister is now

the director. In 2009, Nora Alfayez was appointed as the government minister for girls' education (Islam, 2014).

In 1967, the Faculty of Economics opened the first women's campus in King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, while the School of Medicine was opened in 1975. In 1979, the first campus for women in Al-Riyadh was opened at King Saud University (Hamdan, 2005). The government encouraged university attendance by providing (male and female) students with a monthly allowance. Only a limited number of universities have female campuses and these are for subjects such as art and humanities, business and management, and medicine and science. A number of subject areas have remained restricted to men, including engineering, law, and journalism. This division of university education provision between men and women was undertaken in direct relation to employment, being based on society's perceptions of appropriate jobs and locations for women (Bosbait and Wilson, 2005).

After a number of years at public universities in Saudi Arabia, some girls chose to study abroad to receive better educations in their desired subjects. As a result, over the past decade, many families have begun sending their daughters overseas for their degrees. To address the growing concerns of families who prefer to keep their daughters closer to home, new proposals for private girls' colleges were made, with the government approving the first two of these in 1999 and 2000 in Jeddah (Hamdan, 2005). These colleges attracted upper class girls by providing academic majors that were not offered in public universities and with a very high standard of education based on American curricula. In other words, these private colleges are American colleges in terms of the language in which the courses are delivered (English), as well as the atmosphere, administration, and curriculum choices. Engineering, special education, law, graphics, and interior design are among the academic and profession fields that are offered in these private colleges (Coleman, 2010).

In order to improve the qualifications and skills of university graduates, the Ministry of Higher Education has provided numerous scholarships for both men and women for higher degrees aboard (Islam, 2014). This government policy is supported by two reasons: firstly, most of these students return highly educated and more open to other experiences and cultures; and, secondly, the government hopes that by being generous to these students, their gratitude will eventually bring them back to Saudi Arabia, bringing visions for change. Another critical step was the establishment of King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) in 2009 (Al-

Rasheed, 2013). This university is one of a kind, offering a very high standard of education for Saudi Arabia. It provides not only educational opportunities, but also a new social environment with the first mixed campus in the country (Al-Rasheed, 2013; Coleman, 2010). The King supervised its construction and has rejected criticisms from religious figures concerning its mixed environment. Education for women has been and remains a gateway for many initiatives regarding women and provides a legitimate arena within or through which the discourse of women's empowerment can be raised (El-Fassi, 2014). The ongoing claims about the importance of education provide the government's ticket for promoting women's empowerment though schools and universities, both inside Saudi Arabia and through their scholarship programme for studying abroad.

Work and Employment

Whilst the previous section discussed education for women, this section is concerned with the step after education—paid employment—and this has also increasingly became a focus of reform (Metcalfe, 2011). Women began to work in Saudi Arabia at the same time that education was introduced for girls (Demuto, 2005). Like education, employment has become a legitimate area for women to develop and participate. This was no coincidence, as some of the first jobs for women in Saudi Arabia were in the girls' schools that opened up, which required female teachers. After the oil boom of the 1970s, growing educational and employment opportunities allowed both sexes to work (Demuto, 2005). According to Fakhro (2005), women first joined the labour force as teachers and social workers, before entering the main fields of employment at a later stage. The number of female school teachers has grown significantly—from 5,000 in 1970 to 200,000 by 2001 (Fakhro, 2005: 394). One of the most important issues regarding work and employment has been that women are still viewed by society as being the main caregivers for children and as holding the sole responsibility for household matters (Karam and Afiouni, 2014: 511). The majority of working women have to balance their family and work responsibilities, and the vast majority have domestic maids to help them look after their households and children. In addition, extended family members, especially grandmothers, help to monitor and care for young children. However, the use of domestic labour in Saudi households has had other consequences, such as the many working mothers who rely on maids to take care of their children most of the time (Fakhro, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, employment for women has been restricted to only a few jobs. In addition, Al-Rasheed (2013) notes that major transformations in social and economic levels resulted from the oil boom and these transformations deeply affected Saudi society. Fakhro (2005: 401) argues that the large number of women joining the labour force has had a significant impact on the structure of the family, leading to a rise in the concept of partnerships between men and women in the decision-making process. Recently, women have become more visible in public life, which has led to many debates, with reformists backing greater participation of women and conservatives considering these steps to represent a threat to their authority and traditions (Al-Rasheed, 2013).

One of the main focuses within the current development plan addresses unemployment among recent male and female graduates. This number is increasing as large numbers of students graduate each year (Fakhro, 2005: 404). Minimising the reliance on foreign labour was one of the main strategies adopted by the government through the call for "Saudization": a strategy that aims to replace foreign labour with Saudi labour in both the private and public sectors. The Ministry of Labour imposed regulations and legislation on Saudi labour in the private sector to encourage private cooperation and more jobs for Saudi men and women. Shalaby (2008) explains that the government, through its Saudization plan, is struggling with the dilemma of employing cheaper, more efficient foreign labourers on the one hand, and creating jobs for its own citizens on the other.

The government's promotion of women's employment is clearly seen in the different laws that have been issued by the Ministry of Labour. According to Nazer (2009: 160), the Council of Ministers "adopted a nine-point program that aims to increase the role of women in workplace" in 2005. The ministry has encouraged female employment in both "female" sectors and has received general cooperation on this issue. The concept of sex segregation has been weakened by the introduction of a new law that permits companies to hire Saudi females within their companies. In particular, the ministry has offered cash incentives for companies that hire Saudi females in all-male companies. New small private businesses and projects are also starting to emerge and take shape. These businesses, planned and owned by young ambitious women, have taken advantage of recent support from the government (Nazer, 2009). It is also important to note the role of family support, which plays a major part in Saudi life. In fact, most families are supportive of women's education and work, although there are a few more constraints on women's employment than on

education. However, family support varies in this matter between being highly supportive and very restrictive (Welsh et al., 2014).

In 2012, the Ministry of Labour issued three laws regarding women's work concerning the hiring of women in lingerie shops, as cashiers, and in children's play parks. After years of employing foreign male workers in these jobs, women are now to be employed in these roles instead. It is interesting to note that these laws were issued as a result of campaigns by businesswomen, who were the main force behind the government's decision (http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/18/227045.html). This was followed by two pieces of legislation in 2014, one of which made "working-from-home" jobs official and another that provided arrangements regarding nursing mothers (http://twasul.info/118325/). The Ministry of Labour has responded positively to calls from businesswomen and other NGOs regarding women's work and these laws have been officially applied in the workplace with a resultant increase in women's employment in retail shops, which was previously dominated by men.

More recently, new amendments took place in the labour system regarding the expansion of women's employment in the private sector and the other one aimed at increasing the economic empowerment for Saudi businesswomen. According to a World Bank report, during the year 2018 Saudi Arabia undertook major reforms to the labour market, one of which saw the launching of a program that gave points (Nitaqat) to companies in the private sector who employed Saudi nationals of both sexes, after so many years of relying mostly on foreign workers. However, the report stated that to ensure that these workplace reforms take place, they have to be supported by more political and social reforms. (https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/567481538076937948-0280022018/original/mpoam18saudiarabiasauks914fin.pdf)

Women and Legislation

As an Islamic country, Saudi Arabia is strictly governed by Islamic law (Shari'ah), which directs all aspects of life and includes "personal status law". Personal status law deals with issues of marriage, divorce, guardianship, and the custody of children; however, judges make decisions according to their interpretation of this law (Hamdan, 2005). According to Demuto (2005), women face many more legal restrictions in the courts than men. Criminal law also affects women's rights in Saudi Arabia and remains unsuitable for dealing with the new positions and roles occupied by working women, such as dealing with sexual harassment, kidnapping, and rape.

According to Al-Awadhi (2005), Saudi criminal law tends to mitigate punishments inflicted upon men who commit so-called "crimes of honour" (husbands, fathers and brothers), despite the fact that such crimes deprive women of their fundamental right to life due to mere suspicion or social reasons (Al-Awadhi, 2005: 435).

The legal system also discriminates against women by preventing their Saudi nationality from being passed down to their children if they marry non-Saudis (Demuto, 2005). This creates difficulties for many women, but, due to the patriarchal nature of Saudi society, the laws remain very rigid. Not being treated as Saudi citizens, the children of Saudi mothers and foreign fathers may be prevented from accessing social services. However, sons are given Saudi nationality at the age of 18, while daughters will never acquire Saudi nationality. Conversely, the law gives Saudi nationality to non-Saudi woman who marry Saudi men within five years of marriage. Reform of the judicial system, however, has begun with the passing of new laws to restructure it, focusing on creating independent courts and providing training for judges (Human Rights Watch, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, the other area that has witnessed huge changes is legislation regarding women's employment. The Ministry of Labour has been active in responding to advocacy demands regarding women's employment reforms and also in making sure that these laws are enforced through a follow-up and monitoring system (Metcalfe, 2011). In addition, some of the obstacles that previously prevented women from working have been phased out through legislation, such as the requirement to have a man representing any businesswoman (http://www.alarabiya.net/articals/2011/10/03/169890.html). Legislation regarding women is still undergoing a lot of changes, with NGOs mobilising further improvements, such as the recent involvement and participation of women in the legislative body (Majlis Alshoura). Daily news items report that new laws are being issued, while existing laws are being adjusted or repealed. Moreover, as stated above, the adaptation of the Saudi Vision 2030 programme has also impacted the judicial system with a wave of new legislation primarily regarding family law, which has been an area of significant struggle for many women.

Conclusion

As more and more social changes occur, issues concerning women and women's rights have become a paramount focus in Saudi Arabia, being regularly discussed in public. It is noticeable that many of these changes have occurred since 2005, that is, after King Abdullah's accession to the