



# WOMEN'S RIGHTS, MAYBE

By Carol Heath

As some of you wonderful SDW readers may have noticed, I haven't been around for a while. I believe my explanation will be of some interest to some of you. I teach English online to over 250 countries. In February of 2023, I was invited by a long-time student from Saudi Arabia to come to her country and meet her and her family. I accepted, as I had many students from Saudi and thought I could meet some of them. I planned to stay in Saudi for a month and spent 4 months. Long story short for a myriad of reasons I sold my house and moved to Saudi Arabia. This, however, is not the subject of this article, it is only a sort of introduction. I have fought for women's and children's rights for most of my adult life. I am presently living in a country that is not exactly known for either. However, things are changing!

As fate would have it, I've picked a perfect time to move to Saudi Arabia, as the country is going through a major transformation called 'Vision 2030'. This ambitious goal recognizes that "any successful, modern nation includes women as an integral part" of said success. With that said, it may be helpful to learn about Saudi's background concerning women's rights. I will endeavor to present a short history lesson to illuminate your understanding of Saudi Arabia's societal development as a nation.

Saudi Arabia is a monarchy formed in 1932, by King Abdulaziz Al-Saud. It has been ruled as such since 1953, by the royal family, all sons of King Abdulaziz. Saudi, like most Arab countries, follows the laws of Islam. These laws are taken directly from their holy book known as the Quran. For many years Saudi was governed by the Wahhabi school of thought; it is part of the Sunni Islamic religion. One could say this school of thought would be known as 'zealots' in most religions.

Women's societal roles in Saudi Arabia were and are heavily influenced by Islamic and local traditions. Islamic, national, and local laws impact women's rights as well. When Wahhabi was in power, they took full advantage of their interpretation of the Quran and

stunted and in some cases stopped the rights of Saudi women.

According to the Encyclopedia of Human Rights, "sex segregation is a key aspect of Islamic legal theory." Men and women do not socialize together; once a woman gets her period, she is considered almost invisible. They attend school with other girls no interaction with males whatsoever. Unless they are a father, brother, uncle, or a milk relation. (Don't ask, it is another whole article in itself). This practice has been used to curtail women's rights. It is known as mahram and is 'The Sharia legal notion of 'shielding from corruption'. Moreover, it justifies segregation according to many zealots of the Islamic faith.

Unfortunately, the laws are mostly unwritten, which gives judges almost total discretion. Consequently, and not to rock the boat, they often side with tribal traditions. Which in many incidents declares women have no rights as far as I can ascertain. I am not alone in this conclusion as many activists like Wajeha al-Huwaider, "compare the condition of Saudi women to slavery."

I began this article with 'Things are changing in Saudi Arabia' and they are thanks to the present King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the 25th son of King Abdulaziz. One of his first acts as the new ruler of Saudi Arabia was to streamline the government bureaucracy, cutting out many ministers. He declared changes would continue under his leadership and he was true to his word. Changes occurred in many areas such as Human Rights; major changes in financial institutions; the formation of the Ministry of Culture; curtailing the powers of the religious police, and Wahhabi rules. This single act did more for women's rights than almost anything else. He appointed his 7th son, Mohammad bin Salman Saud as the Crown Prince in 2017, who is now the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, known for his aggressive foreign policy, ambitious economic vision, and controversial social reforms. I would like to add a personal comment, he is a fox.

Prince Mohammad has carried out many of his father's reforms and has added a few of his

own. Together with his father, they envisioned a massive undertaking called Vision 2030. When this was announced, King Salman and Prince Mohammad proclaimed, "Vision 2030 recognizes that a successful, modern nation must encourage and empower all members of society, including women." Women's rights have grown and expanded under their leadership. Saudi women are becoming more involved in society, government, and business.

These are the advancements that have occurred in women's rights since 1955. (Note the time it took between changes before 2017):

1. The first private school for girls opened in Jeddah in 1955.
2. In 1960, King Saud issued a royal decree that all public schools in the country be accessible to girls.
3. In 1970, the first school for higher education for girls was founded.
4. In 1999, the Saudi government agreed to issue women identity cards.
5. In 2005, Saudi Arabia banned forced marriages. (Took you long enough)
6. In 2009, the first Saudi woman minister was appointed to the cabinet.
7. King Abdullah allows women to vote in 2011, for the first time ever.
8. In 2012 the world saw the first Saudi woman compete in the Summer Olympics.
9. Things are beginning to move in 2013. as the government allowed women to ride bicycles and motorcycles in public - only in recreational places.
10. Also in 2013, The Consultative Assembly declared women hold at least 20% of its seats.
11. Now comes the real changes under King Salman, who in 2017, decreed that a woman be allowed governmental services such as healthcare and education without the consent of a male guardian.
12. In 2017, King Salman decreed women the right to drive.
13. Women were allowed to enter a sports stadium in 2017.
14. In 2018, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and legislation restricting the powers of the religious police. (YAY)
15. In 2018, Saudi Arabia issued a resolution that prohibits wage discrimination for women who perform the same job as a man.
16. In 2019, the Saudi Supreme Court issued a law requiring.
17. Courts to notify women of divorce via text; before the guardian man could get a divorce without notifying his spouse (I'm sorry I have to comment on this one, were they for real? Come home and find no home, no clothes, nothing and guess what no money either. What a crock.)
18. Now we are talking, starting in August 2019, women have the right to register for a divorce, or a marriage, apply for a passport and other legal documents, and travel abroad without their guardian's permission. They can also register as co-heads of a household, live independently from their husband, and become eligible for the guardianship of a minor.
19. Also in 2019, the Saudi Ministry of Defense stated that women can join the senior ranks of the military.
20. And finally in 2019, Saudi Arabia issued a ban on marriage for men and women under the age of 18.
21. In August of 2020, the Saudi Cabinet approved an amendment that prohibited women from working nights or in hazardous jobs and industries.
22. As of January 2021, women can now change their personal information like family name, names of children, and marital status without the need for a guardian's permission.
23. And as of 2021, this is a biggie, drum roll please, single, divorced, or widowed women can

live alone without permission from their male guardians.

24. And if you are a Muslim woman, as of July 2021, the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, religious practices announced women have the right to register to perform the Hajj without being accompanied by a mahram (Father, husband, brother, uncle).
  25. In February of 2022, the Saudi women's national football team competed in, and won, their first every international match against Seychelles by the score of 2-0.
  26. In March of 2022 women over the age of 45 were allowed to perform Umrah without a male guardian. Shortly after that, a new decision was announced allowing Muslim women under 45 years old to travel without a male guardian to perform Hajj and Umrah rites.
  27. In July of 2022, the first woman Deputy Secretary-General was appointed to the Saudi Cabinet.
  28. In September 2022, Saudi Arabia appointed the first woman to chair the Saudi Human Rights Commission.
  29. Also in September of 2022, it was announced Saudi Arabia would send the first woman into space in early 2023.
  30. On January 5, 2023, FIFA appointed the first Saudi woman international referee.
  31. And in January of 2023, King Salman approved an amendment of the Saudi nationality law that allows Saudi women married to foreign men to pass on Saudi citizenship to their children.
- Reading all the rights I believe highlights the lack of women's rights in Saudi Arabia before King Salman's leadership. To many women, I suppose these rights seem trivial, but for a Saudi woman, every right they were given was like a steppingstone to recognition of becoming a viable member of society.

The Deputy Minister of Commerce announced the prioritization of women's participation in all fields for Vision 2030. Women's rights in Saudi Arabia are a topic of concern and controversy internationally. Saudi women have experienced major legal rights reforms since 2017, after facing Wahhabism religious fundamentalist dominance for decades. According to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, "women in Saudi Arabia still experience discrimination with marriage, family, and divorce, despite the reforms, and the Saudi government continues to target and repress women's rights activists and movements. Prominent feminist campaigns include the Women to Drive Movement and the anti-male-guardianship campaign, which have resulted in significant advances in women's rights"

The father and son team of King Salman and Prince Mohammad has made huge strides as far as women's rights. But it means very little in some families. Saudi women under 35, are beginning to transform their lives, at least they are trying. Even with all the rights they have achieved many families are still stuck in the past when Wahhabi was in power. The government has opened so many doors, yet some women are not allowed to go through them and live their dreams. Being able to travel without a father, brother, or uncle, to another country and pursue a better job, experience different cultures and people, or the most sought-after and elusive dream of all FREEDOM.

I have talked to so many Saudi young women with the same dream of freedom to control their destiny, cut their hair, venture out without hijabs, niqabs, and abayas, (the traditional dress for women to leave the house, which leaves only their eyes and hands exposed), meet a boy for a simple conversation at a coffee shop, play rock n' roll or country music so loud the house vibrates, play a sport, just simple ordinary things that most woman take for granted.

I only hope that one day every woman in Saudi Arabia can be and feel free!