

# Will Saudi Women Get Equality?

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Women in Saudi Arabia, like women all over the world, demand respect, equal rights, and to not be treated as second-class citizens. The highly-debated freedom to drive is but one of their requests, alongside their personal ambitions and a genuine desire to contribute to every area of Saudi's development without any legal obstacles or barriers preventing them from doing so. So where did Saudi Arabia's handicap towards women's rights come from?

Addressing this question requires a deep dig into the social and religious roots of the issue. But since its founding in 1932, Saudi Arabia has gone through a number of cultural shifts. Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly a conservative country, since it revolves around the sacredness of the two Holy Mosques. However, it still possesses a capacity for opening up.

Saudi intellectuals raise two critical points about potential steps towards such openness. First, they must be small, slow, and gradual, so that no overwhelming cultural upheaval will be imposed on the Saudi people. The second point is that this openness must come from within, rather than from external forces. I agree with the second point, but vehemently disagree with the first. The harsh reality is that the "gradual-change" approach would take a needlessly long time to fully implement.

So who will determine what Saudi people want? Does the majority of Saudi society, men and women, reject the idea of openness and giving women their full rights? Most importantly, why are these basic rights even subject to deliberation to begin with? Posing these questions would undoubtedly compel one to ask the following: who is the primary beneficiary of not giving Saudi women their full rights? Is it the government, or is it the society? The answer is, quite simply, a few but influential religious parties that have shamelessly used women as a socio-political tool to gain socio-political influence. Collectively these parties were called the Revivalists, in reference to the Islamic revival that was taking place at the time.

In the 1960s, the revivalist movement rejected the idea of allowing women into education. Wise political decisions stood up to this movement, and women now represent more than 55% of Saudi graduates in higher education. The daughters of the very same members of this hardline movement are now racing towards higher education and scholarship opportunities abroad.

The sixties also found Saudi Arabia on the cusp of full legal gender equality, as the level of intellectual openness rose after many students returned from their overseas study missions. Unfortunately, a cultural regression caused by two main factors followed. First, Saudi Arabia's collaboration with the U.S. in the expulsion of the Soviets from

Afghanistan, which seemingly could not have been done without giving hardline religious voices more space to influence Saudi society. These hardliners were extremely vocal about the plight of the Afghans at the time, which only added more pressure on the kingdom to carry the mantle of defending the Muslim world. The second factor is the seizure of the Great Mosque of Mecca in the early eighties. It was the most distressing event for Saudi social fabric, fraught with confusion and uncertainty. In the aftermath, Saudi Arabia made some concessions to the religious establishment as a guarantee to preserve social cohesion.

But these factors do not absolve Saudi Arabia of the responsibility to give women full rights and equality. The question is, are there any indications that Saudi Arabia will actually turn the page? The impression I get from popular Saudi discourse is that the answer to this question is an emphatic yes.

This is because Saudis are looking to the 31-year old Deputy Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, to ensure equality. Despite the many challenges, he is attempting to undertake LBJ-like social reforms and Thatcher-like economic reforms in a country that is infamously resistant to change. He explicitly hinted that an end to the ban on women's driving is in the pipeline, which would arguably be the most symbolic change towards women's rights in the Kingdom. He also issued a transformative order that barred the religious police from making arrests, which they previously did to young men and women for even attempting to mix with the opposite sex. The Deputy Crown Prince is also keen on putting Saudi women in positions of influence, and appointed Reem bint Bandar to head the newly established Women's Sports Authority. He also appointed Sarah Al-Suhaimi to lead the Saudi stock exchange Tadawul, the largest financial market in the Middle East.

To answer the question posed by the article's title, I think the answer is in the affirmative. I say this not only because Mohammed bin Salman is strident in his pragmatic efforts towards reforming the traditionally conservative kingdom, but because he also recognizes that the key ingredient to any resilient and diverse economy is the unbridled empowerment of women. ❖

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