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The Role of Women in Two Diverse Arab Cultures: a Widening or Closing Gap?

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Abstract

The role of women in any country is greatly affected by the level of democracy and personal liberties provided in their system of rule. Democracy is a form of government where the population of the society controls the government. Presently, there are twenty-two Arab countries. Only two of them are functioning as democratic governments. Those two are Lebanon and Iraq. The remaining countries are generally governed by either a monarchy or dictatorship. This paper will present the differences between the roles of women in two diverse Arab cultures, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, and explore the relationship between those differences and the type of government. Saudi Arabia is one of the Arab countries governed by an absolute monarchy. However, pressures from both within and outside the country enabled the first public elections last year for municipal positions. Saudi Arabia has a state religion, Islam. Consequently, their justice system is based on Shari'ah; the law for judging behavior of Muslims. The Shari'ah law under the strict Wahabbism interpretation in Saudi Arabia limits what a woman can do in society. Their women live in a repressed and gender segregated society lacking many freedoms. They lack rights to vote, to have custody of their children, to drive, to work in desegregated public areas, and to do anything without the approval of their husband. Lebanese women, on the other hand, live in a democratic Arab country, where civil rights including religious freedoms and equality of women have already been in place. Lebanese women participate in voting, driving, and property and business ownership; in fact, they have rights that are similar to those of Western women. Regional conflicts, political instabilities and cultural changes continue to evolve and shape the Middle-East landscape. How will these trends impact the future role of women in these two diverse Arab cultures?

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The role of women in any country is greatly affected by the level of democracy and personal liberties in their system of rule. The position of women in the following two countries, Lebanon and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will be compared and contrasted. There are, presently, twenty-two Arab countries. Two of the countries are struggling with what could be considered a "failed state" as their government slips in and out of control. These fragile democratic states are Iraq and Lebanon. All of these are a role-model for the remaining Arab countries. Saudi Arabia on the other hand, has been an absolute monarchy since its establishment in 1932 by King Abd-al-Aziz. The difference in women's rights in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia were probably the same some fifty years ago. Since then there has been a progressive change in the realm of Human Rights. Certain freedoms that are experienced in the western world but restrained in the eastern dominion will be discussed. Women in western societies can be blinded by their own freedom and unable to look past their own liberties, sink into their own shells. What western women may consider simple liberties such as: voting, driving, working, equal opportunities in education, and marriage rights will be further examined in these two Arab countries. Regional conflicts, political instabilities, and culture changes have indeed played an important role in the development or non-development of these personal liberties. Conflict continues to stretch its binds across the Middle East, repeatedly reshaping the positions of women.

In the adopted Saudi Constitution by King Fahd in 1992, general principles need to be shown (The Saudi Network, 2007).

Article 1: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a sovereign Arab Islamic state with Islam as its religion.

Article 8: Government in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is based on the premise of justice, consultation, and equality in accordance with the Islamic Shari'ah.

Article 26: The state protects human rights in accordance with the Islamic Shari'ah.

Article 48: The courts will apply the rules of the Islamic Shari'ah in the cases that are brought before them....

The Basic Law sets out the rights of citizens, duties of the state, system of government, and provides that the Traditions (Sunna) of the prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an are the country's constitution (The Saudi Network, 2007). In general, neither the government nor Saudi society embraces the idea of separation of religion and state.

Shari'ah impacts the legal code in most Islamic countries, though the extent of its influence widely varies. Lebanon is 59% Muslim and the Shari'ah law applies to this majority (Anderson, 2007). Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state and therefore is all based on Shari'ah. Shari'ah governs all aspects of life, especially in the personal-status law, which controls marriage, divorce, and inheritance. An Islamic marriage is a contract between a woman and a man. The man is the head of the family and the wife must act within his will. The Qur'an does permit a man to use physical force against a disobedient wife (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005). Muslim women cannot be legally married to a non-Muslim under Shari'ah, but a Muslim man has the right to marry a non-Muslim woman. Also under Shari'ah, a man has the right to divorce his wife without cause. He does this by uttering the phrase "I divorce you" three times over a time period of three months. On the other hand, a woman can only divorce a man if he is infertile, insane, has a contagious disease, or if she can prove to the justice court that the man is abusive. A

women's testimony does not carry the same weight as a man's in court according to Shari'ah (Morley, 2006). In court proceedings involving divorce, the female party needs a male relative to speak on her behalf. Several witnesses are required in such cases as adultery in order for there to be criminal conviction. Even then, the courts usually rule in favor of the man. The children traditionally belong to the father in the course of divorce. Still, the mother has the right to care for her children while they are young. The age of the children at which a mother loses custody differs from country to country (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005). One story that received a good deal of attention was the situation that Pat Roush found herself in. Pat Roush, an American citizen, was separated from her two little girls by her Saudi husband. He allegedly kidnapped them and returned to Arabia with them. Though she has fought hard with the United States and the Saudi government to retrieve them, it has been to no avail. "The United States closes its mouth, its eyes, its ears," says former Saudi Diplomat Muhammad Al-khilewi (Roush, 2007). What particularly the U.S government could do is not known. Her story and her fight continue to this day. Some believe Shari'ah is a danger to women and their personal liberties.

The discrimination against women touches all features of their lives. This includes family life, decision making, employment, education, and the justice system. It impacts the array of human rights violations commonly accounted for in Saudi Arabia. "The lives of women in Saudi Arabia are regulated by a web of mores, rules, and fatawa. It is the will of the state that controls almost every aspect of women's daily life, from their right of movement to the right to redress for violent assault" Amnesty International said (Amnesty International, 2000). Women are not allowed to go anywhere without a male guardian or leave the country without his consent. They can be detained for riding in taxis or eating with a man other than a relative or appearing with their heads uncovered in public places. They are not permitted to marry or get identification papers without the consent of a male guardian. The country's steep divorce rate is considered to be due to the high number of forced marriages. As of 2005, top religious authorities have banned the practice of forcing women to marry against their will (BBC News, 2005). This is a significant victory for the rights of women in Saudi Arabia. Women still are not able to drive in the country. Saudi women in public relations claim that bringing women closer to cars is a threat to conservatives, as driving will open the door to women's emancipation (Ya Libnan, 2006). According to a few professional Saudi's with whom my father works, women will be able to drive within two to five years. Some are preparing themselves emotionally and mentally for this change. Despite these views, many disagree. Driving "strips women of their femininity" and puts them in situations that will violate the prohibition on the sexes intermingling wrote Ruqiya al-Duwaighry on an opinion page of Al-Watan, an Arabic daily (Ambah, Faiza S., 2004).

In education and work there is discrimination toward women of Saudi Arabia. Women comprise half of the total population and their contributions to the nation is well needed, even a must. Modern education for women in such countries as Saudi Arabia is only a product of the 20th century. Enrollment of young girls in the primary grades quadrupled in Saudi Arabia between 1965 and 1975 (Al-Qazzat, n.d.). Educating women will lift the nation. Women account for 55% of university graduates which is more than men ('Scoop' Independent News, 2000). They graduate full of knowledge and talents to share and yet they are barred from working most professions and limited to only a few

such as being a nurse or teacher. Also, gender segregation means women are limited to unequal opportunities and facilities. A journalist, Abdul Rahman Al-Rashid, for the Arab news stated in 2000, "Is there any logical justification for spending huge amounts of money on women's education when thousands of female graduates face the prospect of either remaining at home or entering a single profession?" (Amnesty International, 2000). Saudi women are only able to work with the consent of their husbands, once married. A few changes in the workplace of women have been attempted by such companies as Aramco. In the last year they hired Saudi women as secretaries in a non-segregated environment which is unheard of. Just four years ago Aramco hired women to work the IT help desk in a desegregated location in Khobar where the Mutawah's ended up raiding and kicking everyone out (Anderson, 2007).

Women have few political and social rights and are not treated as equal members of society. They are not allowed to hold public office positions or vote. In the "superficial" elections held in Saudi Arabia in 2005, only men were allowed to exercise their right to vote (Anderson, 2007).

In 2004, a three day conference for women was held, the third of several forums started by the reformist, Crown Prince Abdullah. Dr. Fatima Naseef pulled together thirty-two women from all over Saudi Arabia and put together a seven page document of their requests, including a female staffed office where women can be advised on their rights under Shari'ah concerning issues such as divorce and child custody and a safe house for battered spouses. The conference spurred media coverage and debates on the pros and cons of allowing women to drive, how the court systems are partial to men, the high unemployment women suffer, and if desegregated workplaces really violates Shari'ah. "In Saudi Arabia it's taking us a long time to move forward because we're still discussing basics. We're still debating whether it's permissible in Islam for women to drive or work alongside men. Neither is against our religion, the taboo has only been passed down through local traditions and customs," says Maha Fitaihi, one of the conference's participants (Ambah, Faiza S., 2004). Reform has been on the Crown princes agenda for years and the recent violent events such as 9/11 and violent militant extremists have accelerated this need for change. Still, women only make up 5% of the workforce. "We're not taught to speak out and ask for our rights," says Rania al-Baz (Ambah, Faiza S., 2004), who gained notoriety when she was beaten by her husband. She suffered eleven fractures. However, on the other side of things, not everyone is pleased about the prospect of empowering women. A petition signed by thirty-two women reached Al-Watan newspaper. It asked the conference's participants to stand against "the coming flood of negative changes facing women...The purpose of women working and driving cars is to get women out of their homes, which would have negative social effects and ...lead to immoral behavior," claimed the statement (Ambah, Faiza S., 2004). Despite certain views such as these, Johara al-Angary, head of the family sect of the new Human Rights Commission, said "For the first time I feel really optimistic (in reflection to the progress of women's rights). Rights are not given, they're taken. And we're at a turning point. This is our moment. We need to seize it now. Otherwise future generations will never forgive us" (Ambah, Faiza S., 2004).

Lebanon's Muslim population accepts the Shari'ah but much more loosely than that of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is what might be called an extremist state in

comparison. Point blank, women have hardly any rights, while Lebanon is a different story.

The roots of the Lebanese political system were set down on the eve of its independence in 1943 from French occupation. Women's Suffrage was granted to Lebanon in 1952, but this did not allow women to be able to vote until 1953 (BBC News, 2007). In Saudi Arabia this is unheard of. Historically, Lebanon has a record of impressive human rights awareness and commitment to their protection and production. The Constitution of Lebanon was laid down in 1943. Its freedom of association, expression, and assembly turned it into the first democratic republic of the Arab World. In the Constitution of the Republic of Lebanon, the following articles are important to mention (Center for Democracy in Lebanon, 2005):

Preamble

- a.) Lebanon is a sovereign, free, and independent country
- b.) Lebanon is a parliamentary democratic republic based on respect for public liberties, especially the freedom of opinion and belief, and respect for social justice and equality of rights and duties among all citizens without discrimination.

Article 7: All Lebanese are equal before the law

Article 8: Individual liberties are guaranteed and protected by law

Article 9: There shall be absolute freedom of conscience

A civil war broke out in 1975 and lasted for fifteen years ending in October of 1990. More than 150,000 lives were taken (BBC News, 2007). The war was spurred by a Christian militant attack on Palestinian's who were on a bus that day in April of 1975. The civil war's end left Beirut in ruins and Hezbollah, a guerrilla group gaining increasing power in politics and remains the most powerful militia in Lebanon today (Wikipedia, 2007). After the war, a revised constitution was made in September of 1991 (Amnesty International, 1997). Lebanon has been considered a "failed state" of democracy due to Hezbollah's attempts to overthrow the government. It has been said to no longer be a republic of the people. "Lebanon's imperfect democracy needs time to evolve and strengthen...but all the Western pressure on Lebanon these days risks destroying Lebanon's stability and our democracy with it" says Annia Cizadlo as posted on the 'New Republic' online (Ciezaldo, 2005). She claims though that, in irony, if there wasn't any of the Western pressure, the democracy would fall apart for sure. "Lebanon was a democracy; now the issue in Lebanon is sovereignty, because Lebanon was not a country that was ruled by a dictator," says reformer El-Khazen. "We had elections in Lebanon for 100 years. Women in Lebanon voted in 1953. Civil society has always existed in Lebanon...but no one was listening to what Lebanon was saying—that, if you invest in Lebanon's democracy, the return will be fruitful." (Ciezaldo, 2005). Lebanon is a project for democracy that the Arab World needs established in its own midst, by its own cultures, and aimed at its own future. For over 50 years its democratic strength came from its political culture and its human resources. The Arab World is seeing small efforts in Saudi Arabia, but it is still controlled by radical Islamists and their propaganda machine. Women are still suppressed in this oppressive regime. Lebanon, on the other side, "is a launching pad that can muster enough indigenous resources to mount the information campaigns, educate the cadres, and provide a safe haven to the international coalition to establish its strategic credentials" (Phares, 2005).

Muslims differ in their interpretation of the Shari'ah and on the understandings of where women stand under the Islamic law as far as equality goes (Ibrahim, 1998). Many Muslims seem to slowly be coming to terms with the idea that women should enjoy at least some equality compared to men such as in employment, education, and government services. Some Muslims believe women should be treated as equals to their male partners and others believe otherwise. The difference between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia is vast especially due to the interpretation of the Shari'ah law, which Saudi activists claim is the reason progress has been so hard to come by. A 20 month long research surveying certain core Arab nations such as Lebanon and Saudi Arabia was done by Freedom House. They found that in Lebanon, though the constitution embraces the concept of equal rights, women's role is still in many cases inferior due to legal discrimination (Freedom House, 2005). Women in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia are for the most part, especially Saudi Arabia, not aware of their rights due to their educational weaknesses. In Saudi Arabia and in the Muslim population of Lebanon, husbands have authority over women in the areas of work, travel, and divorce. Though Lebanon may be considered a far more beneficial place for a woman to grow up in, there are still drawbacks. "The lack of women's rights must be regarded as a chief obstacle to democratic reform," says Freedom House's Executive Director Jennifer Windsor (Freedom House, 2005).

The women of Lebanon are as diverse and contradictory as the different religious sects of their environment in which they live. This can make it all the more difficult to promote women's equality. For example, personal status laws, governed by religious tribunals, make women unequal not only to men but to each other. Non-Muslim women are entitled to an equal inheritance as their male heirs. Muslim women, on the other hand, only receive half of that. Also, polygamous marriages are allowed within Muslim communities and not that of Christian ones (Ghazi, 2001). Due to the religious differences within Lebanon one will find on the beach, two kinds of women, those sunbathing in bikinis and those covered and using the hijab (headscarf). The diversity is accepted, but could easily cause conflict.

The first modern schools for women in Lebanon were opened in 1835, while education among women in Saudi Arabia is mainly a product of the 20th century. Lebanon, in the 1970's, almost reached sex parity in enrollment (Al-Qazzat, n.d) . Though curriculums of the past have had blemished views of the role of women in society, today with the help of several laws, there has been an increase of women in the workforce including giving women more equality regarding duties and rights. Many Lebanese women are graduating in Applied Sciences as well as in the Fine Arts and Humanities, as the number of women graduating from secondary school continues to increase. The education of women is much higher in Lebanon than in Saudi Arabia and the employment possibilities extend even farther. As for divorce within Muslim communities in Lebanon, Shari'ah is still applied but much more loosely. Women can file for divorce from the judicial courts much more easily and for a wider span of reasons. However, in the course of child custody, the religious dominion of the father is the religious law applied, much similar to that of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, if the father is Muslim and the mother Christian, the Islamic law, Shari'ah will apply. Also, if a Christian mother attempts to raise her children Christian when married to a Muslim man, the father can claim her unfit to be the mother and Shari'ah would permit divorce.

Shari'ah requires that children of a Muslim father should be raised in the Muslim faith. Islamic law spread across Lebanon in the 1980's reasserting its traditional cultural values. As a result, the wearing of abayas (cloaks) and hijabs (headscarves) has become common among Muslim women (Morley, 2004). For Christians, since the war tore through Lebanon, women have had a more independent role.

The ongoing struggle for women's freedom goes beyond that of gaining equality, it challenges the government system altogether. Women's groups argue that reformation of the government system would not only ensure the equality of women, but also raise opportunities of women's participation in molding Lebanon's future. "This hurts our government and our laws," says Linda Matar, President of the Council of Lebanese Women's Organizations, a coalition of major Lebanese women's groups. "Incorporating personal code laws into civil law is essential in order to be honest to ourselves when we speak of freedom and democracy" (Khouri, 2007). She explains that a true democratic government is not governed based on religion. An Arab girl born in this modern day has a much better chance of going to school and finishing college than her mother did. It has been considered that without freeing women from the knots of illiteracy, no real social, economic, or political development can take place. Several studies in the Arab World prove that in educating women, their status will improve as it is the strongest force for social change and will affect every aspect of their life from the family to politics.

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