

Women's Suppression in Saudi Arabia Based on Religious Beliefs

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Introduction

In 2007, a Saudi Arabian woman was reported to have been beaten to death by her own father. The young woman had been talking with a man on Facebook when her father found her and killed her for violating his *namus* or honor. (McElroy, D. 2008) In that same year another woman was sentenced to six months in prison and 200 lashes for being a victim of a gang rape. The woman had been in a car with a man who wasn't a relative at the time she was raped. This was a violation of the sex segregation laws in Saudi. The punishment had originally been lower but it was increased after the rapists claimed that she had attempted to influence them by using the media. The girl was raped 14 times. (200 lashes..., 2007)

Islam is a monotheistic religion centered around the Qur'an. Islam's believe that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad by revelation from God through the angel Gabriel. The purpose of this was to cleanse and restore the religion of the Old Testament prophets, such as Adam and Moses, to its original form. Indeed, Muhammad was not considered the creator of Islam but the last Messenger of God or prophet to the people of the Earth. The Qur'an consists of 114 chapters many of which mention women, none of which advocate or condone the suppression of women that is occurring in Saudi Arabia. (Compiled by TurnToIslam.com, 2006)

This suppression of women based on religious values and traditions is wrong. The Qur'an does not advocate that if a woman speaks to a man on Facebook she should be killed by her father, it does not state anywhere a woman who has been raped is guilty of any transgression. This shows a misinterpretation of the Qur'an and the terrible things that have come of it. Women should never be suppressed or abused because of religious beliefs. This paper addresses the misuses of the Qur'an's teachings, the mistreatment of women because of it, and what must be

done and is being done to stop the suppression of women in Saudi Arabia.

I. The Qur'an's View on Women and Historical Examples of Religious Corruption

References in the Qur'an about Women

The Qur'an mentions women a number of times in its 114 chapters. In the Qur'an, there are verses that forbid female infanticide (81:8-9), command that women must be educated the same as men (Al-Bayhaqi), and that women should be treated kindly by their husbands as stated in Ibn-Hanbal, No. 7396, "The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and the best of you are those who are best to their wives." (Compiled by TurnToIslam.com, 2006) If the Qur'an states that women should be treated kindly and educated the same as men then why are women being abused and having acid thrown on their face for trying to go school? The answer is simple the religious beliefs stated in the Qur'an have been altered when applied to real life over the course of time.

Historical Examples of Suppression based on Religious Beliefs

This is not an uncommon thing to happen in religion. There are many examples of this occurring throughout history such as during the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation in Western Europe. In all instances misinterpretations or alterations of theology led to chaos or suppression. During the Dark Ages, the Catholic Church controlled much of what was done in Western Europe, progress in art, science, and literature were almost at a standstill. The clergy were able to manipulate ancient texts to take on different meanings because they were written solely in Latin which only the highly educated could read. This led to other corruptions

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in the Church, such as the selling of *indulgences*, or forgiveness of sins in exchange for money. This corruption led to the Reformation which began because a German monk by the name of Martin Luther tried to eradicate the corrupt practices of the Church, Martin Luther eventually founded the Lutheran Church which was the first of many churches to break off from the Catholic Church. Upon seeing this, the Catholic Church launched a Counter-Reformation hoping to purify what the Lutherans and other new churches saw as corrupt. To purify the Church, the Cardinals met in the Council of Trent which established *Inquisitions* or courts whose sole purpose was to try those who were believed to be guilty of heresy.

The Social Group Persecuted now in Saudi Arabia

The suppression that occurred during the Middle Ages and the chaos that consumed Europe at the time of the Reformations are examples of what can happen to the people in religiously based societies when the doctrine is misinterpreted or corrupted. This is happening in Saudi Arabia today except instead of mass suppression and persecution, the suppression has become narrowed to include a single group, women. Women in Saudi Arabia are being mistreated in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern Countries because of practices in Islam that are not doctrinally sanctioned by the Qur'an.

II. How Religious Beliefs are Causing Women's Suppression in Saudi Arabia Today

Problems with a Theocratic Government

Saudi's government today is a theocratic monarchy. It is run by a parliamentary system headed by a king. However, the Islamic church has a say in everything and at the end of the day,

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it is the church who has the control. This has led to a society similar to the Puritan societies of colonial America where the church is in control and its leaders are able to impose laws that they think are in congruence with the teachings of the church regardless of whether they are just or not. In Puritan society, the government turned tyrannical. People were restricted from everything that church officials deemed as evil or corrupt, such as music and dancing. In these Puritan societies punishments were dealt for everything from speaking too loudly to committing adultery. The members were compelled to follow these strict regulations and laws because they believed the church held the fate of their spiritual well-being in their hands and that to oppose these laws would be to jeopardize their souls. This gave the government greater control over the people in these societies and the government often abused this power.

What is happening today to Women in Saudi Arabia

Today, this power held by the church in Puritan societies is being exercised today by the Islamic church in Saudi is happening to a majority of Saudi Arabian citizens, most of which are women. Women in Saudi Arabia today have limited rights because of a few supposed beliefs of Islam that the church leaders enforce through secular laws. In the Qur'an, it states that women must be protected by men. (Qur'an 4:34) The Qur'an was written around 600 C.E., in a time where a good defense didn't mean a good lawyer but a good sword. The times have changed but the tradition of a male protector still persists. The commandment that was meant to protect the women of Islam has led to their enslavement. Today, in Saudi, women cannot enter or leave a hospital without a male "protector," they can't cross borders without a male guardian, or register a complaint with the police without a male guardian's consent. The unjustness of the male guardian tradition can be summed up in a few words by Wajeha Al-Huwaidar,

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The ownership of a woman is passed from one man to another. Ownership of the women is passed from the father or the brother to another man, the husband. The woman is merely a piece of merchandise, which is passed over to someone else- her guardian. How do you recognize a maid or a slave? The decision making is out of her hands. All the decisions are made by the master. Women today are not allowed to make any kind of decision- not about marriage, work, studies, medical treatment, leaving the house, or travelling. (Memri, 2007)

The male guardian tradition is closely tied to the Islamic practice of *namus*. *Namus* is an archaic tradition closely relatable to the medieval concept of honor. A male's *namus* encompasses the modesty and chastity of the women that he "protects." This has led to *honor killings* or fathers and brothers killing their daughters or sisters in order to protect their *namus*'. An example of these so called *honor killings* occurred in January of 2009, when the young Tulay Goren was killed by her father after falling in love with a Sunni Muslim. Her father disapproved of this because the man was from a different branch of Islam so he killed Tulay to protect the *namus* or honor of the family. (Calvo, V. L., 2009) This clearly shows that the male guardian tradition, which was beneficial at first, has become just another way to justify the suppression of women by men in Saudi Arabia.

III. How this Injustice Can Be Rectified

Attempts at Change

Women in Saudi Arabia should not have to deal with "the stranglehold that communal and religious forces exercise over them." (Joseph S., & Kandiyoti D., 2000) The question is how do women overcome these issues and gain their rights in society? Some women are already trying however, they aren't getting very far. A Saudi woman engineer got a manufacturing company agree to allow women to work there. However, she ran into a problem, there seemed to be no way to do this without violating the law of sex segregation, which originated as an Islamic law but was rather strictly interpreted by the Saudi government. Unfortunately her plan fell through. (Doumato, E. A., 1999) This is a problem many women right activists are discovering as they fight for equal rights, religious traditions are buried so deeply in culture of Saudi Arabia that there is little room for change. Despite this women are still fighting for their rights. In 1990, a

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group of women's rights activists staged a protest in Saudi against the ban on women's driving. They drove their cars around the capital until they were stopped by the police. This protest proved fruitless, the women and their husbands were punished severely, many lost their jobs, and the ban on women's driving was not lifted. However, this shows that women are willing to change despite the restrictions place upon them by the government due to their strict interpretation of Islamic doctrine. There is an obvious solution to this problem instituting a separation of church and state. This will be a gradual evolution because it's so embedded in their culture but it is possible given time. (Murphy, C. 2008)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Qur'an is being used to justify the mistreatment of women in Saudi Arabia. Many women and other human rights activists are fighting to rectify these issues, but, for the most part, they have been unsuccessful. The best way to end the suppression of Saudi women would be the separation of the church from the state. If the Islamic church ceased to have power over the Saudi government then it would have no power to enforce religious beliefs as law. This would give Saudi women something they have never had before, a choice. They'd be free to choose whether to wear a veil, have a male guardian, or drive. The women of Saudi Arabia should be given the right to choose how they live their lives pertaining to Islam. Lastly, the Qur'an does not sanctify this mistreatment of women which is what the Saudi government is using to justify their strict laws against women.

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