

Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements

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The historical socio-economic and political conditions of Saudi Arabia are an essential aspect of understanding a woman's position in Saudi society. The persistence of women's exclusion from public life in contemporary Saudi Arabia is one of the most heated debates not only among Muslims but also worldwide, as Saudi society comes under more and more scrutiny internationally. In 1980, there were more female graduates in the humanities than male. University women could study most of the same subjects as their male counterparts except those, which might lead to their mixing with men. This paper explores some of the restraints and achievements of women in the field of education in Saudi Arabia today.

Illiteracy, literacy rate, women's rights, education, Saudi Arabia, oil wealth

INTRODUCTION

Geographical and Cultural Context

Saudi Arabia is a country in Southeast Asia with a population of approximately 19 million people. The country was established in 1932 by King AbdulAziz Ibn AbdulRahman Al Saud. The country covers about 900,000 square miles. Arabic is the official language and Islam is the official religion. Saudi Arabia has a literacy rate of about 62 per cent, which is the lowest literacy rate in the Gulf nations. In Saudi Arabia, female literacy is estimated to be at 50 per cent, and male literacy at 72 per cent (UNDP, 2003). According to the 1992 census, 4.6 million of Saudi Arabian residents were foreign workers. This explains why in Saudi Arabia women constitute seven per cent of the work force in 1990 and four per cent in 2003. However, the Saudi literacy rate in 1970, in comparison to the literacy rates in the Middle East and North Africa, was 15 per cent for men and two per cent for women. This rate was the lowest in these regions, with only Yemen and Afghanistan ranking lower. Thus, the steep rise in literacy rate by the 1990s, as shown above, must be seen as a considerable accomplishment in the time period. Additionally, recent statistics by the UNESCO show an estimate and projection for adult illiteracy for population aged 15 to 24 years for 2015 is 2.9 per cent for women and 2.7 for men, and the illiteracy rates for those 15 years and older in 2005 are expected to be 26.7 per cent for women and 14.2 per cent for men, and in the year 2015 are expected to be 17 per cent for women and 9.5 per cent for men (UNESCO, 2002). Many scholarly sources portray women's education, since it started, as being highly valued in Saudi society (Zurbrigg, 1995, p.82).

The Position of Women in Saudi Arabian Society

In recent years, no sector of Saudi society has been subject to more debates and discussions than the women's sector and their role in the development process. Moreover, issues regarding

women's rights and responsibilities in that development have been equally controversial among both conservatives and progressives in Saudi society. Before exploring women's education in Saudi Arabia, it is important to review some of the political and social events that have contributed to Saudi women's position in their society. In the past 50 years the Middle East region has endured some major challenges that have affected all Middle Eastern nations and particularly the Gulf nations. Saudi Arabia, like other Gulf nations, both directly and indirectly, has experienced some major social upheavals. First and foremost, the discovery and production of oil¹ in 1930s was a major occurrence in the country. The oil-generated revenue in the early 1970s introduced large-scale changes, including the opening of education to both boys and girls. The economic upheaval arising from the increased income from oil gave rise to a trend towards education abroad, and a change in lifestyle, and these two changes affected the whole structure of society (Yamani, 1996, p.265). Oil and its resulting wealth had an unimaginable impact on Saudi Arabia in an extremely compressed period of time.

The Iranian Shi'a revolution in January 1979 that overthrew the Shah and the newly established Islamic (Lacey, 1981) government in Iran strengthened Saudi Arabian religious leadership. In addition, the Mecca uprising on the 20th of November 1979 was inspired as many analysts allege, as a result of Khomeini's example in Iran and the successful defeat of Iranian royals by religious clerics. Shortly after that the first Gulf War took place, which involved Iran and Iraq, and the second Gulf War in which Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. Just recently, of course, the United States has waged war against Iraq. Each of the incidents mentioned has affected women and challenged Saudi society, a society that until then had experienced very little change in its policies toward women.

The American presence in Saudi Arabia began with the production of oil in 1979 and the establishment of ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company) in Dhahran, a city on the east coast of Saudi Arabia where most American companies are located. American engineers and oil executives brought their families and built many companies and Western-style houses, schools and compounds. Foreign migrant labour accounted for 43 per cent of total workforce in oil companies in the mid 1970s (Yamani, 1996, p.265). American women were shopping, unveiled, in malls and driving cars, something Saudi women were forbidden to do. Saudi women soon began asking for some of the same rights as their American counterparts. Some discussions took place on a formal level. However, with the Mecca uprising of 1979 such discussions came to a halt. Saudi Arabia arrived in the 1980s with a more complex society, eager to enjoy the fruits of advancement on all social and economic levels. At the same time there was a determination to preserve the country's religious and social traditions (Huyette, 1985). This balance between the two has been difficult to maintain, especially with regards to women's professional space.

Moreover, during and after the Gulf War of 1990 (or 'Desert Storm' as it was called in the United States) the American presence was highly visible in the Saudi Arabian capital city of Riyadh and on the east coast close to the Saudi-Kuwaiti borders with the participation of American troops in the war, American women in service were seen driving cars. Not only did Saudi women see American women driving military cars in Riyadh and Dammam; they also

¹ The first important well discovered in 1938 and major production started shortly after World War II.

saw their Kuwaiti sisters who had fled their country enjoying a freedom denied to Saudi women themselves (that is driving cars). All three Wars affected the whole region in different aspects.

Women's schooling at all levels – elementary, secondary, high school and university – remained under the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002, while the education of boys² was overseen by the Ministry of Education. This was to ensure that women's education did not deviate from the original purpose of female education, which was to make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for 'acceptable' jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature³. The General Presidency for Girls' Education, which has not enjoyed the same prestige as the Ministry of Education, was heavily influenced by religious conservative scholars. The historian, Lacey, who spent four years living in Saudi Arabia researching the story of the Saudi Kingdom concluded, "reform in Saudi Arabia had never been a simple matter, [and will never be given the religious mentality of people]" (1981, p.363). In 2002, the General Presidency for Girls' Education and the Ministry of Education were amalgamated as a result of requests from both the general public and the government after a fire in March 2002 in an elementary girls' school in Mecca resulted in the death of 15 young girls. The Saudi press reported that the presence of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, or religious police, in that incident contributed to the high number of deaths among the girls. The press, who witnessed the fire, maintained that the religious police discouraged the firemen from entering the girls' school, stating that since both the girls and their teachers may not be wearing their *hijab* [headscarf] it would be sinful to approach them. The issue was widely discussed in the Saudi press and also covered by the foreign press. "This caused a widespread public outcry and prompted a debate about the religious police role in such cases" (Prokop, 2003, p.78). This incident raises many questions not only about the responsibilities of the religious police but also about the General Presidency of Girls' Education. In fact, public dissatisfaction with the General Presidency for Girls' Education had been evident before the fire when women's education had been granted a lower budget than that of their male counterparts. The number of girls' schools housed in old, and therefore unsafe rented buildings were on the rise. The resulting amalgamation provoked a revolt among religious conservative scholars who approved of women's education only under the direction of *ulama*⁴ (conservative religious scholars).

This paper analyses Saudi women's education since its beginnings in the 1960s. The objective of the paper is three-fold: first, to highlight the current status of women in Saudi society in general and, in education, in particular; second, to differentiate Islamic teachings from the literal and narrow interpretations of Quranic text that cause tensions around women's education

² Boys schooling was also a challenge in that Crown Prince Faisal, at that time, and his wife Iffat had to introduce the boys school in a courageous and slow manner. The couple located the school in the city of Taif to avoid disturbance (Lacey, 1981).

³ Many Saudi women and men consider women's nature to be different from that of men; therefore, they are not allowed to work in the same jobs as men. That is why only certain jobs (i.e., teaching and nursing as opposed to engineering) are open to women. The notion that women are only able to work in segregated spheres where they cannot be seen by strange men is still dominant.

⁴ *Ulama*, some resources refer to religious conservatives scholars by calling them *ulama*. Conservative religious scholars are those who believe in one interpretation of Quran. However, the word *Ulama* is the plural for *alim*, derived from the word *ilm*, which means knowledge. *Ulama* refer to a group of people (usually men) who are scholars in religious knowledge and thus can be said about conservatives and progressive interpreters.

in Saudi society; third, to stress the progress achieved so far in women's education as well and to explore the changes in women's education that will be vital to the economic survival of the country in years to come. In including the foregoing I am not talking about the sexism women face; as Smith (1987) states, "we are not talking about prejudice or sexism as particular bias against women or a negative stereotype of women. We are talking about the consequence of women's exclusion from a full share in the making of what becomes treated as our culture" (Smith, 1987, p.20). This paper is not about stressing the patriarchal nature of Arab society in general and Saudi society in particular; rather, it is about explaining the consequence of excluding women from public life and constraining their educational choices. Women's issues in Saudi society are often mistakenly connected to Islamic teachings.

Unlike liberal feminists who do not consider the inequities of class, race, ethnicity, and disability, and unlike Marxist feminists who see the disappearance of gender inequality as contingent upon replacing capitalism with Marxism, I consider women's issues from a different standpoint (Elliot & Mandell, 1998). Women's issues in Saudi society and the gender inequalities that are obvious in its education system are institutionalised and difficult to dislodge through individual action. Women's inequality is traditionally structured in the society. "The rationale for a need to focus on women's achievements in higher education is considered a key social development indicator measuring women's status and conditions in any country" (Rashti, 2003, p.2). This suggests that Saudi women devise their own strategies to challenge gender inequality and achieve social justice not only in education but in all life matters, especially given the complexity of women's issues and concerns in what is so called "Third World" Islamic patriarchal societies.

The uniqueness of Saudi women's situation is derived from their presence and yet non-presence in the public sphere. For instance, Smith, a Western feminist, suggests that gender inequality appeared to be rooted in women's traditional absence and silencing in public life. There is a similar case with Saudi women. As Doumato states "...girls were taught enough to buy into an assigned role, a role in which they were subordinate to men, but not enough to challenge it" (2000, p.93). This comes from the normalisation of gender differences in the curriculum content at all school ages for both boys and girls. Gender ideologies that can be attributed to traditional and socio-economic values gained legal force in Saudi society by being associated with Islamic teaching. Until recently in 2001, Saudi women were considered an extension of their male guardians. A woman's identity first appears in relation to her father's family's identity card. Later, if she marries, she will be added to her husband's card or, in the case of her father's death, to that of her nearest male kin. In Saudi society in general, it is believed that the role of women was basic to maintaining the structure of the family and therefore of society (Alireza, 1987). The deeply embedded and complex nature of gender inequality in Saudi society should be taken into account.

Additionally, the practice of seclusion of Arab Muslim women is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Historically, Muslim Arab women participated in all aspects of life politically, socially, and economically, as is briefly discussed in the section on women's education. Having grown up in Saudi society, it is clear that women's training and education "ensure that at every level of competence and leadership there will be a place for them that is inferior and subordinate to the positions of men" (Smith, 1987, p.34). This is what's called "glass ceiling" and it pertains to many Arab Muslim societies as well as some Western societies. Women do

not have power in any position and are subordinate in both the private and the public sector to male individuals who may often have inferior qualifications to their female counterparts.

In Saudi society “women need to learn to relate to one another and treat each other as sources of knowledge” (Smith, 1987, p.35). Since Saudi women, as all women in any given society, differ in their class, race, and cultural background for them to challenge gender inequalities there is an urgent need to cross borders and ignore their cultural and class differences. These women unite and collaborate with each other to overcome male dominance in their society. The use and the acceptance of only a sole religious interpretation of Quran (extremism⁵ or fundamentalism), to promote the authority of men is a pressing issue. In the conservative religious scholars views women are often considered to be irrational and incomplete beings. As Smith (1987) suggests, men were provided with a licence to exclude women’s voices in Western society. In some cases Islamic and religious texts are being interpreted literally, which provide some conservative religious scholars to silence women’s voices in the name of Islam. However, recently religious ideology has become a tool for Saudi Muslim women who are learning how to study Islamic ideology in depth and to apply it to women’s issues⁶. Women are learning to use the so-called, ‘legitimate language’, religious language, a language that cannot be challenged by their male peers to attain their goals. Saudi women are also directed towards studying Islamic law and Shar’ia so they can speak in the name of Islam. This is a powerful way to confront the *status quo*.

THE SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

A study of women and education in Saudi Arabia must take into account social and political events in recent years: Saudi Arabia was formally proclaimed a country only 70 years ago. Since that proclamation, many unique changes have taken place (Yamani, 1996, p.265). In 1979, a Muslim extremist who was a former theology student led an attempt to seize the holy mosque in Mecca. He was attempting to officially put an end to what he called “Western influence” in the country. In 1978, a year before the siege, newspapers and magazines were publishing articles written by both men and women discussing women’s rights to participate in public life. Issues such as women’s right to drive, where women could and should work, and the types of education appropriate for women were all hot topics (Doumato, 2000). However, discussions around increasing women’s freedom and mobility through education and work were perceived from the very beginning by the religious groups as dangerous “Western ideas” (Arebi, 1994, p.17).

Many political analysts have opined that the Mecca siege was fuelled by the government stance on women’s rights and role in the development of the Saudi nation. In 1979, “Western influences,” as some conservative religious scholars argued were more obvious since women

⁵ A claim can be made to differentiate between extremists and fundamentalists that is based on the meaning of the two concepts (Alghamdi, 2002). The Fundamental of some thing is the basics of it; however, saying that may imply that Islamic fundamentalists are those who are the most knowledgeable of Islamic teachings. Whereas an extremist, as defined in the Longman’s dictionary, is someone who has extreme political opinions and aims and willing to do unusual or illegal things to achieve them. Thus, Islamic extremists are those who are regarded in Islam as ‘heretics’ because of their excessive piousness. Those who violate the principles of Islam, a religion of peace, are considered extremists (Kuroda, 2001).

⁶ Some Muslim women for instance, Riffat Hassan and Ali Shaheen were able to challenge interpretations that excluded women.

not only went to school but also started to enter universities. However, some historians argued that Mecca siege was not all about women's freedom; it had a great deal to do with asserting the extremists' views on all aspects of life. Nevertheless, women issues became the focus in any discussion about progress. A woman's right to participate fully in the development of the nation was forbidden. In addition, after that television stations were prohibited from broadcasting images of unveiled women. Women were also banned from conducting their own businesses without a male representative, preferably a family member⁷. Nonetheless, a recent survey shows that approximately 16,390 businesses are owned by women and women own 40 per cent of the nation's private wealth. However, these women were not, until recently, allowed to deal with that money unless through a male relative representative. According to Saddeka Arebi, in Islamic history, a fifteen-centuries-old tradition shows many examples of independent Arab female entrepreneur⁸.

These events significantly shaped the women's movement in Saudi Arabia for the next 20 years. Universities and colleges for women continued to be built throughout the nation. However, conservative religious scholars continued to pressure society to bend to their requests, especially those related to women. The general public also indicated that a Saudi woman's place is in her home. The percentage of women working outside the home, according to the 1999 census, is five per cent and these women are in the teaching and health sectors (Shukri, 1999, p.28). As a result, Saudi women continually encounter limitations and restrictions at both educational and professional levels. Few women are recently⁹ gaining access to pursue professions other than teaching and medicine. Additionally, only recently has women's segregation been discussed publicly.

THE STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S EDUCATION: AN ONGOING BATTLE

The advent of formal public schooling in Saudi Arabia dates to the 1960s, when the first official primary school for girls opened its doors in Riyadh (AlMunajjed, 1997). Prior to this, informal schooling took place for both boys and girls, the aim of which was to teach religious rituals. The goal of education was to learn the Quran, the Hadith [Prophet narrations], and Sunna [Prophet Mohammad's customary behaviour and opinion on various issues drawn from the Hadith], to know how to pray and to follow the rules of behaviour of the Muslim community. These tasks required memorisation but not necessarily reading (Doumato, 2000). This is why many illiterate men and women can read the Quran. Thus, education of both sexes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia first took place in the *Kuttab*, a class of *Quran* recitation for children, which was usually attached to the local mosque. The teaching of girls also took place in private tutorials, which occurred in the homes of professional male or female Quran readers. Education for girls stopped at puberty, "when strict seclusion at home began and veiling in public became mandatory" (Altorki, 1986, p.19). However, the first founder's opinion of women's education was encouraging. Abdul Aziz, the founder of the Saudi Kingdom, expressed his support for women's education. In a conversation with St. John Philby, a British explorer who converted to

⁷ This edict was still in force until recently.

⁸ Khadija, the first of the Prophet Mohammad's wives, was an independent entrepreneur who also proposed to her male worker, none other than Mohammad himself. She continued her business after she married him (Arebi, 1994, p.17).

⁹ In the past two years

Islam and eventually became a close friend and adviser for the first king, Aziz, stated: “It is permissible for women to read” (Al Rashid, 1976). According to Doumato educational resources were dedicated mainly to boys:

In the atmosphere of religious revivalism [that took place in the mid eighteenth century] in Riyadh [the capital of Saudi Arabia] one might have expected, since Wahabi belief recognized women’s right to a religious education, that women would attain access to religious learning to a degree comparable with that of men, but this was not the case. Doumato. (2000, p.38)

Karmi also points out in her article *Women, Islam and Patriarchalism*,

that all Saudi Arabia women’s education figures showed a marked improvement on what had been the case 20 years before. Nonetheless, the differences between male and female school attendance are striking. (Karmi, 1996, p.71)

Women’s education did not change the patriarchal nature of Saudi society. Women in every field are subordinate¹⁰ to men.

But the history of women’s initiatives to achieve education reaches back to as early as the 1940s. Lacey relates that around this time, when the Ministry of Higher Education began sending a few bright young Saudi men¹¹ to continue their studies abroad, a bright young woman by the name of Fatina Amin Shakir wanted to have the same opportunity. She applied for a Ministry of Higher Education grant to study abroad, but the Ministry rejected the application saying that it was immoral to allow young single women to study abroad. Fatina and her father appealed to King Faisal, who was known to be a supporter of women’s education. Fatina eventually became one of the very first Saudi women to hold a PhD. Her thesis, which focused on the modernisation of Third World countries, featured an interview with King Faisal, the man who had made her dream come true (Arebi, 1994; Lacey, 1981). Fatina Shaker, a female Saudi anthropologist and perhaps the first to obtain a PhD degree from an American university (Purdue), believes that denial of women’s rights is rooted in the hegemony of social practices, dubbed by Fatina as customary laws or traditions, rather than rooted in Islamic essence (Arebi, 1994, p.217).

According to Lacey (1981), in September of 1963 the government had to send official forces to break up demonstrations in Buraydah, where much of the opposition to girls’ education took place¹². The citizens of this town had to be forcibly restrained from demonstrations when they heard of the plan to educate women. The former King, Saud started the informal schooling and

¹⁰ Recently, a Saudi woman was (in the summer 2000) assigned the highest positions ever held by women in Saudi Government, one as the assistant undersecretary of Education Affairs appointed to Al-Jawhara Al Saud.

¹¹ One of the first men sent to Egypt was Abdullah Al Teraki who later became Saudi Arabia’s first Minister for Oil and Petroleum.

¹² Yamani presents a very interesting thought relating to the history of Saudi Arabia and anthropology. Women of Hijaz [the western province of Saudi: Mecca Jeddah and Madinah] have a more heterogeneous character than that of other regions and provinces in the country. She posits that since many of the residents are settlers who moved after hajj from different parts of the Islamic and/or Arabic world to become citizens of the holy land they may have no tribal backgrounds. Hijazi women are more apt to go outdoors and express themselves publicly, a phenomenon reserved for men in other provinces characterised by a tribal background. To Yamani “whether upper or middle class the role of women in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia can only be seen in the context of their patronymic group and of the national purpose and not as one section of society struggling for its right in isolation from men” (1996, p.265).

Faisal managed to convince tribal bedouins of the importance of formal schooling for women (Huyette, 1985, p.74). It was Iffat Al Thunayan, King Faisal's wife, who pushed enthusiastically for the education of women in Saudi Arabia. She transformed her wish that women be allowed to pursue science, language, and other subjects into a reality. Saudi Arabia was the last country in the Gulf nations to introduce secular education. Iffat established the first girls' school in 1956. In his book *The Kingdom* Lacey reported, "such circuitous manoeuvrings were not devised solely to sidestep the opposition of the religious sheikhs. Dragging Saudi Arabia society into the twentieth century alarmed ordinary people as well" (Lacey, 1981, p.364). The prospect of Saudi girls travelling through the public streets every day to attend school aroused alarm in the extremely conservative Saudi society. Yet, Faisal and Iffat were so committed to educating girls that they planned for the first women's academy located in Jeddah, the first of its kind in the country. The academy was named, *Dar Al Hanan*, "The House of the Affection." Faisal and Iffat suggested its name as an inspiration coming from the Quran commandment to care for girls (Lacey, 1981). Since King Faisal took into consideration the economic realities of the people, prior to the oil boom, government granted education in Saudi Arabia is free at all levels, though not compulsory (Boudy, 1999, p.19).

In 1957, the local press got a green light from officials and King Faisal to explain the objectives of *Dar Al Hanan*. One of the main aims of the school is to raise good mothers based on Islamic essence and modern educational theories. Iffat argued with many conservative religious scholars saying that the place where a child learns religion and manners is in the home, therefore the spirituality of future generations would be improved through mothers who had received schooling and education. In 1960 a national committee consisting of members of the conservative religious scholars insisted on controlling and supervising the education of girls throughout the country. In response Iffat, who had planned ahead, established the first girls' college in Riyadh called *Kulliyyat Al Banat*, or the Girls' College. Additionally, as part of her educational efforts, Iffat established what is called *Al Nahdah AlSaudiayh*, a Saudi progressive association that provides free classes in Riyadh for illiterate women, classes on hygiene and childcare, and courses on foreign languages and typing. All classes are funded and run by members of the movement. *Al Nahdah* has provided Saudi women with opportunities to participate in their society and to fulfil their role outside their homes as independent identities.

Though King Faisal supported women's right to achieve their goals, he was not able to convince his public at the beginning. When he sent the official force to Buraydah in 1963 to keep the girls' school open, he did not force the parents to take their daughters to school, though he ruled that girls' schooling be mandatory and obligatory, a ruling that continues to the present time. Fatina's interview with the King indicated that for Faisal, tradition should be made allies of development. He rejected the idea that in order to modernise Saudi Arabia its past would have to be erased, and he believed that slow and steady change was better than violent, disruptive attempts to force change. King Faisal obviously understood the background and the traditional thinking of his people. At the same time he saw a need to enlighten his people's understanding of Islamic teachings regarding women's education. Whenever King Faisal faced resistance he would ask, "Is there anything in the Holy Quran which forbids the education of women?" He further stated, "We have no cause for argument, God enjoins learning on every Muslim man and women" (Lacey, 1981, p.368).

The conservative religious scholars have approved the education of girls only with certain conditions and constraints. Girls' schools are surrounded by high walls and backup screens

behind the entry area doors. Each girls' school, college or university is assigned at least two men who are usually in their 50s or 60s who are responsible to check the identity of those who enter the school, deliver and pick up the mail and generally to safeguard the girls inside the school until they are picked up by their fathers or brothers. To date Physical Education and fitness facilities are not available for women. School buses for women have not escaped the rigid rules. Since women are not allowed to drive, the buses are driven by elderly men. Girls enter the bus from the back door and are usually supervised by a female relative of the driver.

Indeed, the opening of official schools for girls met with fervent opposition. Non-religious education of girls was considered useless and even, according to certain conservative religious scholars, dangerous. However, the public took a generally favorable position toward the enrolment of girls in school. By 1981 the number of girls enrolled in schools was almost equal to the number of boys. The administration of girls' education was controlled by the Directorate General of Girls' Education, an organisation staffed by conservative religious scholars 2002. The purpose of educating a girl, as stated by the Directorate General, was "to bring her up in a proper Islamic way so as to perform her duty in life, be an ideal and successful housewife and a good mother, ready to do things which suit her nature as teaching, nursing, and medical treatment" (Alireza, 1987).

But this changed to some degree after the fire at the girls' school in Mecca. The religious police, as some call them, are recently given less control. Many of their rights and responsibilities, so long ago taken for granted, have been reconsidered. In fact they have been officially forbidden to interfere in the work of police or firemen. The interference was subject to criticism in some newspaper with regards to their obstruction during the elementary school fire in Mecca where 15 girls perished when religious police refused to allow firemen to enter the school because girls and women may not be wearing their veil (Al-Sari, 2003).

Historically, progress in Saudi society is rarely smooth or effortless for various reasons. Some religious conservative in charge of girls' education, insisted that the time Iffat wanted to be devoted to teaching girls science, language and liberal arts should be instead dedicated to teaching religious subjects. Iffat succeeded in getting over a quarter of a million women enrolled in Saudi schools and colleges by the end of 1970 (Lacey, 1981). Iffat's contribution to women's education in Saudi Arabia is particularly significant in as much as she has always insisted that her beliefs on women's education are derived from the Quran and the Hadith. Iffat has repeatedly quoted Quranic verses that state that women and men alike should attain knowledge. In interviews conducted by Lacey, Iffat maintained that God would judge women as he would judge men, with no preferences for either sex. Men and women, said Iffat, were equal in the eyes of God. King Faisal supported his wife, maintaining that Saudi Arabia's future included equal education for men and women.

According to the Saudi anthropologists Altorki¹³, the first girls to go to school in Saudi were from families that lived abroad. In its first year there were 15 young girls attending Dar Al Hanan. Ever so slowly the idea of educating girls began to attract certain prominent Hijazi families of Mecca and Medinah¹⁴, especially those who appreciated King Faisal and Iffat's

¹³ The first generation of Saudi women to obtain PhDs in 1973 from the University of Berkeley in California, are now teaching at the American University in Cairo.

¹⁴The two cities closest to Jeddah where the next girls' schools to be established.

educational plans for girls. The largest infrastructure of the Arab world was built around the 1960s. The hiring of teachers from different Arab countries made education possible for Saudi society in a very short period of time (AlMunajjed, 1997, p.80). Moreover, in its early stages the disparity in educational achievements between females ran along class lines slightly more than was the case for boys. The first women to get a PhD or advanced degree from Europe or the United States were of a high status. Initially only high-class women had opportunities to be educated.

Although occurrences at the political and social level have had a great impact on women's progress in Saudi society, they have not prevented women from pursuing education. In fact, many families sent their children to private interior schools in Egypt and Lebanon, and more recently Jordan and Syria, for formal schooling prior to its introduction in Saudi Arabia (Arobi, 1994). Many upper class families, who refused to wait until Saudi universities opened their doors to women sent their daughters to study abroad. Today many still send their daughters to study abroad when the fields in which they wish to specialise (that is, journalism, engineering and aviation) are closed to them at Saudi schools.

Since women's education in Saudi Arabia officially began, educational levels have increased rapidly. The number of women's institutions has grown from 15 in the 1960s to 155 in the 1970s (Al Mohsen, 2000). Al Mohsen points out that women's education started with arts and education; all other fields were available only to men. 1986 statistics show that in 1970 the total number of girls in elementary schools was 246,559. That number had increased to 649,509 according to the 1989 UNESCO statistics. In secondary schools 185,902 girls graduated in 1982 and in the year 1986 the number had increased to 255,766. The first girls' college was established in 1970 in Riyadh and admitted those with secondary level schooling. Approximately 10 similar colleges with the same requirements opened by the 1980s. Subjects included the arts, education, general science and sciences such as biology, mathematics, religion, Arabic, geography, history, English, psychology and home economics. Library sciences were exclusively offered at Riyadh's college (Al Malik, 1987).

The first university that has a women's campus was Riyadh's King Saud University, which opened in 1979. Subject areas included Arabic, English, history and geography. In the 1980s women's campuses at King Saud University added colleges for public administration, medicine, dentistry, nursing, and education. The Jeddah campus of the University of King Abdulaziz, admitted women to economics in 1967, and the Dammam City campus of the King Faisal University in 1978 opened a centre for women which included colleges of medicine, nursing, agriculture, nutrition, home economics and education. King Saud University in Riyadh has two campuses one in Al-Qaseem (a city 400 kilometres from Riyadh) and a second one Al-Joof, a city on the northern part of the country.

King AbdulAziz University has branch campuses in Madinah¹⁵ with women and men's campuses offering mathematics, biology, medicine, computer sciences, and humanities. The College of Interior Design of Architecture followed in 1982 (GPWE, 1990). In 1975 Saudi women were allowed to enter medicine, and the first admission of women to the Faculty of Dentistry occurred in 1980 (Jawad, 1998, p.28). In all universities women have attended segregated campuses, and subjects were more limited than those for men.

¹⁵The second holy city after Mecca.

In 1971, Umm Al-Qura University in Mecca admitted women to all departments except Physical Education, the training of judges and Islamic Economics. The University of Imam Prophet Mohammed Ibn Saud in Riyadh, a religious university, opened four of its departments to women; these were Shar'ia (the Islamic law derived from the Quran and the Hadith, D'awa (the spreading of the message of Islam), Al Ageda (belief of Islam), and Itejahat Mu'asera (contemporary attitudes) (GPWE, 1990). Recently in 2002, King Khalid University in Abha¹⁶ admitted women to computer sciences, biology and English. Some of these university campuses have residential accommodations for female students who do not live within travelling distances. These campuses must submit to the same rigid rules as all other women's institutions and workplaces in that they are all guarded by men or security police. The one university in Saudi Arabia to which women are not admitted is the King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran. Currently, there are as many as seven universities¹⁷. Each student is paid approximately \$300 CDN for science and medicine, and approximately \$270 CDN for liberal arts per month.), over a hundred women's colleges across the country, over fifty community colleges. A number of private universities and colleges have also been established in the last 2 to 3 years.

Inspired by Iffat's initiative, her daughters established a private non-profit college for women in Jeddah (the first one) called the *Wisdom College*, or *Dar Al-Hekma* College, which opened in September 1999. It is expected to reach a total enrolment of 1500 students by 2005. The college's modern campus sits on 25,000 square metres of land in Jeddah. Academic programs include a college preparatory program, a general education core curriculum, and academic majors in interior design, business information systems and special education. The college plans to develop broader specialisations in other areas of study such as e-business and health care. All courses are taught in English except Arabic and Islamic Studies. In fact, the college implemented the Texas International Education Curriculum, guidelines and objectives from one of Texas' educational institutions.

Through its current three undergraduate academic programs, the College offers BA and BS degrees to a current student body of approximately 200. The design utilized the American model for academic programs and administrative organization. More than 20 project teams involved over 75 experts from Texas universities and elsewhere and an equal number of Saudi experts to develop the academic programs, administrative structure and procedures, information and communications technology systems, and library and support services. Initial policies and procedures were developed for admitting students, hiring faculty and staff, and planning and managing college operations. (Texas International Education Consortium, n.d.)

According to Mona AlMunajjed (1997) in her book, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, the fact that the government has been actively supporting women's education is evident in the hundreds of schools for girls and the women's campuses at almost all universities. The government has not restricted its efforts to the younger generation. Literacy courses are being offered to older women. The government supports these classes financially, administratively and technically. Women beyond elementary school age or older are enrolled in adult education programs. These courses are available in many if not all districts across the country, and contribute to the rising

¹⁶The capital city of the southern provinces

¹⁷ Owned by the government to which students pay no fees.

literacy rate among women. These initiatives have created more jobs for female teachers. Finally, as has already been noted, the numbers of women attending higher education to pursue masters and doctorate level degrees are continually on the rise. Statistics show that in 1990 women represented 47 per cent of the total undergraduate enrolment at colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia.

Yet, the share of budget appropriations for women's education is only 18 per cent of that for men. Higher education involves limitations and vocational education for women is non-existent. Women are still not admitted to engineering, law, pharmacy, geology, petroleum, and political sciences, and do not enjoy full access to the facilities such as some libraries and recreation centres. Al Mohsen (2000, p.22) states that:

Despite the increased record of support, the Saudi government policy of sexual segregation has saddled women with facilities substantially inferior to those available to their male counterparts.

Moreover, women do not receive the same quality of education as men because teachers for men are better trained. More than 34 per cent of men teaching at men's universities hold doctorates compared to only three per cent of those who teach at women's universities and colleges (AlMunajjed, 1997). Saudi women are not able to enjoy the 200 libraries mostly affiliated with schools, universities and religious institutions or the 70 public libraries except through a male relative liaison or restricted visiting hours. Libraries for women only are extremely small and often poorly equipped (Arebi, 1994). This explains, in part, some of the challenge Saudi women have to overcome in order to do research. In March of 1989, women finally gained access to King Abdul Aziz General Library in Riyadh. They expressed their gratitude, to the second-highest political authority in the country, for giving women such a 'great gift'.

Additionally, it is of significance to mention that the position of women in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia, in particular, cannot be attributed to the presumed intrinsic properties of religion. Such a conception is too facile (Shukri, 1999, p.3). Scholars in the West who debate the status of women's education in the Middle East are often unfamiliar with Islam as a religion, or its ideologies in relation to education. Yet, many assume that Islam as the dominant religion of the region is the key reason behind some prohibitions against women's education, it also discounts Islamic teachings that promote the education of both male and female, and Quranic verses that call upon the use of the intellect to obtain understanding.

Women and Education in Islamic Teaching

In discussing Islamic teaching with regards to women's education, it is important to differentiate between the normative teachings of Islam and the diverse cultural practices among Muslims. One of the most common criticisms levied against Islam is that it treats women unjustly. Yet, in actuality Islamic teachings express great respect towards women. Moreover, traditionally women have had a prominent role in society. "Women in Islamic societies have reached political heights unparalleled in the most advanced Western nations" (Ragab, n.d, p.5). Arab history notes that one of the wives of the Prophet Mohammed, Aysha, led an army of 30,000 soldiers, cooked for them and helped medicate them. Aysha discussed and negotiated various issues and political matters with Prophet Mohammed, who freely acknowledged her wisdom. It is also noted in Islamic historical documents that one sixth of the Hadith record

Aysha as being part of the chain of transmission of the sayings and traditions of the Prophet. This is greatly appreciated among Muslims today. As noted before, Khadija, the first of Prophet Mohammed's wives, managed a successful commercial endeavour and was the first prominent businesswoman in Islam (Badawi, 1995). Fatima, Prophet Mohammed's daughter, is cited in many historical documents as being politically active. Sukie'na, Prophet Mohammed's granddaughter, was a well-known mathematician. More recently, Benazer Bhutto, a Muslim woman, was the prime minister of Pakistan. Nobel Prize winner Shereen Abadi from the Islamic republic of Iran is also a Muslim women's lawyer and a political activist (Al Sari, 2003a, 2003b). Many other examples in the history of Islam negate the claims of religious conservatives regarding women's education. However, while some literal interpretations of Islamic texts accord respect and honour to women, others justify the oppression of women. Unfortunately, literal interpretations of the Quran are those that have strongly influenced unjust behaviour towards women, especially with regards to education. Essential Islamic teaching, however, strongly encourages the education of women in religious, economic, political and social domains. The Prophet Mohammed's views on education are evident in statements such as, "The search of knowledge is a duty for every Muslim male and female", and "seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" (this phrase is attributed to Prophet Mohammed).

Over the years, however, certain pre-Islamic customs have reappeared and gained a foothold (Jawad, 1998). Cultural customs that deny women equality have become entrenched in the Muslim culture to the point where they are often accepted as Islamic rules. Yet, many of the customs or rules adhered to today cannot be found in Islamic texts (for example, the belief that women should not drive cars or that women should not pursue Law or Engineering). "Modern Muslim feminists and human rights activists are arguing that [these practices are] not the real voice of Islam" (El-Solh and Mabro, 1994, p.120). In the past three decades, Saudi women have begun to reclaim some of their educational goals in spite of opposition. One of many prominent Muslim Saudi women and the first ever to be allowed to issue Fatwa¹⁸ [a strictly male domain] is Dr. Fatima Naseef, a religious lecturer and informal marriage counsellor. In a personal interview in 1994 she stated, "Yes we have women Professors and women Deans here. But all decisions, big or small, are made by authorities at the men's university" (Goodwin, 1994, p.216).

In Saudi Arabia some of the highly selective and narrow interpretation of Islam espoused by conservative religious scholars have had a restrictive impact on women's education (Jawad, 1998; Alghamdi, 2002). "Saudi Arabia policies towards women's education and work represent a clear example where Islam has been used to first deny then discourage women's education" (Jawad, 1998, p.28). Many in Saudi Arabia also believe that Saudi women's education will allow them to be actively involved in their society, both at home and in the marketplace. Advancements in Saudi women's education, therefore, requires at least in part that both educators and moderate religious conservative religious scholars alike affirm women's strong participation as leaders in the history of Islam, and that Muslim become aware of their religion's original intention to educate and liberate women. Saudi educators need to teach a history of Muslim women in which is rich in women's political and social advancement. Furthermore, Saudi women and men must be educated about Muslim women's contributions to

¹⁸ Religious ruling

various fields. Finally, progressive religious scholars must cooperate in presenting the essentially liberating Islamic teachings regarding women, especially as they relate to education.

PROGRESS ACHIEVED IN SOCIAL CHANGE FOR WOMEN

Knowing the structure of Saudi Arabian society and understanding the role of tradition and religion is vital to understanding social change in the country, especially as it relates to women. The role of King Faisal and Iffat in the struggle for women's education challenges this belief. Political decisions have always been the decisive factor, especially in matters related to women (Arebi, 1994, p.51). Other analysts of women's status in Saudi Arabia believe that it is related to the relatively short exposure of Saudi society to the West and its culture. How can one expect the country to be modernised in such a short period of time? This suggestion, in particular, denies the tradition of women's education deeply embedded in the religion of Islam. Islam granted women not only the right to education, but also the right to inherit, own property, and full participation in all aspects of life (AlMunajjed, 1994, Yamani, 1996) long before women in the West enjoyed such privileges. Another analyst suggests that restrictions of women's education in Saudi Arabia have to do with the tribal character of the Arabian family. Abo-Lughod (1986) explains how in tribal societies family honour is dependent on women behaving with modesty, chastity and deference to men. Controlling women through mechanisms such as segregation ensures that women do not defy the authority of male relatives by making friends with strange men. While this contention seems to fit for some cases, it cannot be generalised to the entire issue of women's education. In fact, not all-Saudi families are tribal. A high percentage of people who have Saudi citizenship are descendants of migrant workers and religious pilgrims who decided to remain in the country (that is, people from Africa, India and other Arabic nations). This theory is especially deficient when one considers other Gulf nations such as Kuwait and Bahrain that, though consisting of tribal families, do not restrict women participation in public life.

The case of Saudi Arabia is unique in that the country did not undergo colonisation¹⁹ and that restrictions on the women's movement can be attributed to a social and tradition cultural boundaries more than religious. Some conservative religious scholars are influential and promote a narrow and restricted interpretation of Islamic teachings. However, their power has recently restricted since the fire in the elementary school in Mecca 2002 (Al-Sari, 2003). Many religious scholars consider still protested against the amalgamation of the Girls' Presidency with the Ministry of Education in 2002. The only opposition to Saudi system advocates reform is a party calls itself 'The Movement of Islamic Reform in Arabia' [MIRA]. The party's views on women's rights and education are similar to the Taliban, which is considered the most repressive regime with regards to women; Saudi women, therefore, do not look to the party for support.

Saudi women and men who have been educated in the West return to the country with different visions for the future. Many Saudi support women's rights and seek to support progress. Others who support women rights seek to implement change and feel that the restrictions on women have been reaffirmed instead of diminished. However, evidence is to the contrary.

¹⁹ Some part of the country has never been colonised, especially Najed-currently Riyadh and Eastern provinces. However, Hijaz and Southern provinces were under Turkish (Ottoman) rules until Oct 1924 after Shareef Husain's departure (Lacey, p.192).

Despite all these obstacles the number of women's educational institutions as well as the number of women students has been steadily growing, their illiteracy rate has been substantially declined, and they consistently do better on standardised school tests and achieve higher grades than their male counterparts. (Kapiszewski, 2001, p236)

Technology is helping this trend. While traveling to other countries is not an option for many Saudi women who cannot afford the expense of travelling²⁰, through technology the world has come to them. Satellite dishes and more recently, Internet access, have allowed Saudi society to view others not only in Western and European nations but in neighboring Arabic countries. Saudi women see Omani women as ministers and they see that in Qatar women are deans at many universities. Saudi women are now seeking to be part participants of the parliament.

The Gulf Wars have also drawn world attention to the events in the Gulf nations and to the status of women in that part of the world. Ironically, the events of 9/11 brought to light again and more powerfully than ever before the issue of women's rights in Saudi society. In the aftermath of 9/11, the Saudi system in general and its religious education system in particular became the focus of much criticism. One question put forward by Prokop captures the essence of that criticism. Prokop asked to what extent the education system had been shaped and used by religious, political, and socioeconomic forces and interests.

Saudi's critical position in the Middle East stems from the fact that it is the guardian of the two Holy mosques in Mecca and Madinah. It is in the best interests for the United States to ensure stability in that part of the world²¹. American interest in the Gulf because of oil reserves is well known. American-Saudi relations would not be important to either side if not for Saudi oil. Thus, it is of interests to both sides that the country is in complete autonomy and full control of its lands and its people.

In the Saudi context, strong leadership is synonymous with the country's unity, something the family of Saud has managed to provide. No other tribe was able to stop the bloodshed that went on for hundreds of years between warring tribes on the Arabian Peninsula. The unexpected peace and wealth enjoyed by many inhabitants who lived before and after the Saud's government has engendered a great appreciation among Saudis. When the Ministry of Higher Education started sending young Saudi men and women to obtain an education it was hoped that these students would implement change and with their progressive ideas challenged some conservative religious scholars and their rigid ideals. This has not been an effortless case. Progressives and liberals have recently given a chance to present implementation of development plans and openly discuss their progressive ideas.

The conservative religious scholars have powerful influence in public policy, which cannot be ignored. For instance, in 1994 the Council of conservative religious scholars successfully suggested the urgent need to withdraw from the conference of United Nations Population and Development in Cairo due to their disapproval of conference topics, which included birth control, abortion, equality between men and women, and co-education (Yamani, 1996). According to the conservative religious scholars these topics were against the laws of God and against the laws of nature. This occurrence exemplifies the power of conservative religious

²⁰ Another fact is that woman, traditionally and culturally, inhibited from traveling alone without a male relative.

²¹ Since this is the cradle of the Arab world.

scholars. During his lifetime King Faisal tried to persuade the conservative religious scholars and conservative groups to listen to others with different views.

The recent advancement for women, the history of education in Saudi Arabia indicates that the structure of the educational apparatus and the content of teaching have been formulated to preserve the country's religious foundations. However, recently women's rights²² came under international community scrutiny. Despite all the challenges, women's education in Saudi Arabia, has opened new horizons for Saudi women:

On the private level it has increased women's negotiating power within the family. It has also given them greater mobility: hundreds of thousands of girls and women go out daily to either school or work...on the public level, education has made it possible for thousands of women to enter the labor force. (El-Sanabary, 1994, p.145)

Today, with the majority of Saudi women being educated and illiteracy declining uneducated women will soon be a small minority. However, the percentage of Saudi women in the workforce remains the same. Doumato (2000) attributes the lower percentage of women in the workforce to segregation between the sexes. This, however, is not the only culprit. The main problem for many Saudi women, especially businesswomen, is tradition and above all conservative views on women's participation in nation building. This is the case, although the market is also overburdened with foreign workers whose positions could be filled by female university graduates (Doumato, 2000). Taking into consideration the religious background of Saudi society and the difficulty of implementing changes, the suggestion has been made to establish a Ministry of Women's Affairs to study in depth Saudi society to determine its needs for future development. It is hoped this Ministry would also implement changes based on studies of educated, moderate Saudi women who appreciate the need for change.

Some questions still remain. If the education of Saudi women is proven to be a significant success, is that allowing them to move toward the international dialogue of women's rights in the world? Is Saudi, the country with the highest oil reserve in the world, moving toward gender equality in its society? Some events indicate yes, others no. For example, when the United Nations Fourth World Conference 1995 on women, met in Beijing, one of the only countries without an official delegation was Saudi Arabia. The reason for this is that the conservative religious scholars condemned the goal of the conference, which was equality between the sexes. Saudi women²³ are not officially delegated by any ministry to attend any conference where they can have contact with men. This was a contradictory stance considering women and men are in contact with each other in Saudi hospitals, malls and other public areas. Women from other Gulf nations with similar segregation rules and the obligatory veiling rule (that is, Oman and Qatar) participate in NGOs (non-governmental organisations) with their Islamic veil. Islamic *hijab* is never an impediment to women's participation in any educational experience.

Though Saudi women wield social influence and wealth, and there are an increasing number of women involved in business huge enterprises (Azzam, 1996, p.221). Women's visibility at the official level concerns many academics and progressive activists, male and female. The restrictions on women's education and freedom in Saudi society flow from a combination of

²² Saudi Government also in 2001 signed a United Nations pact aimed at ending all forms of discrimination against women.

²³ In the year 2002 few women attended international conferences as representative of the country.

many factors as already noted. But one significant issue is that “the conservative religious scholars tendency that utilises women in the game of power has been geared towards enhancing the view of woman as a ‘gate of Westernisation’” (Arebi, 1994, p.18). Some Saudi conservative religious scholars often use women’s issues as a pawn in the struggle between tradition and modernisation. The chief aim of this group is to control not only women but also the entire Saudi society. This also explains the continuous rejection by some conservative religious scholars of any progress relating to women’s issues, and the constant references the Westernisation of women by Western ‘infidels’ and ideologies. Therefore many columnists, both male and female, who discuss women issues openly in the press, are being attacked in electronic chat rooms and referred as secularists, Western agents, and enemies of God.

On a positive note, the government has become aware of the need to improve the education system and, increase women’s participation in order to ensure economic survival. There is a high drop-out rate among boys, and given that “over 40 per cent of Saudis finish their education before reaching secondary school and that there is a huge gap between the output of the education system and the requirements of the domestic labour market (Roy, 1992; Saudi Ministry of Planning, 2000, p.179). An important question remains unanswered; how do the restrictions on women’s education affect its economy, especially given that more Saudi women than men are highly educated and represent more than 50 per cent of university students (Doumato, 2000)? The problem of expatriate workers, whose presence has increased by 1.5 per cent during the last ten years, is disturbing on many levels (Saudi Ministry of Planning, 2005, p.158). This problem needs to be addressed as it presents a serious challenge to the country’s economy and social ideology²⁴. It remains to be seen whether some restrictions of women’s education continue in the face of these challenges.

Although the education of women is important, the dignity and value of being a wife and a mother should not be diminished by the concept of equality and educational opportunity. There is no either-or binary in Islam with regards to women’s social participation and education. There is no contradiction between being a mother and a professional working outside the home. Women deserve to be able to make this choice. This means that women’s education in Islam is not at all contradictory to concepts such as chastity and dignity, which are highly esteemed and sacredly guarded in Islam (Jawad, 1998). Education among Saudi women has been strongly encouraged by their illiterate mothers. In many cases it was these women who demanded classes in reading and writing for their children and adult literacy classes (AlMunajjed, 1997, p.80). They advocated for many years for adult education programs that did not start until 1973 (Boudy, 1999, p.19).

At the core of the issue of women’s education is the underlying concept of sex segregation. For many Saudi women, sex segregation, does not imply a lesser social status (Huyette, 1985, p.118). I have discussed sex segregation with many educated Saudi women. With regards to the women’s employment rate they suggest that because of segregation women having access to more jobs and do not have to compete with men. Sex segregation of women in Saudi Arabia gives them a professional advantage since there is no competition with male counterparts for jobs in women’s schools, banks and universities (Fakhro, 1996, p.257). For instance, although

²⁴ Many of these workers have criminal records in their own countries or carry infectious diseases and that been recently discovered after causing many national problems.

there is no university training for women in business and bank managements, women only banks exist in Saudi; mathematics graduates can become bank workers after obtaining a diploma in business management and computer training. In her article "Some Observations on Women in Saudi Arabia"²⁵, an anthropologist Yamani explains how Saudi women recently gained more freedom by using the legitimate language of the nation that cannot be challenged by Islamic ideologies. This is an empowering advance for women's status in the country. Using Islamic tenets women are challenging some conservative religious scholars that if they want women to be segregated they need to create more women-only spaces. Women are now asking for women's hospitals, women's malls and women's representatives in all government's levels.

Other issues at stake in regards to Saudi women's education are hidden problems in girls' schooling that need to be investigated. One problem in certain regions of the country is high drop-rates among girls after elementary school level (Jawad, 1998). This, in particular, raises questions about other issues. For instance, some young girls are forced to marry at a very young age. Parents can force their girls to marry at any age. There is no law to prevent parents or a guardian from having their girls marry. This problem varies depending on the socio-economic level of the region and the traditions of the local tribes. This is an issue for researchers, and not only in the field of educational research level but also on educational policy level. There is no law in the country, as yet, that prohibits male guardians (for example, father or brother) from taking girls out of school, no law making education mandatory to high school. These requirements need to be brought in by government. There is also no law to determine the age at which girls can marry.

Women's status in education in Saudi Arabia has been changing, and the Ministry of Higher Education has considered sending talented women abroad to finish their studies in high-demand subjects. Moreover, recently the government supported the election of a Saudi woman, Thoraya Obaid, as an executive of the United Nations. Obaid, the first Saudi Arabian Executive Director of the United Nations' Population Fund (UNFPA), enjoys a reputation as a fighter and a pioneer for the education of women (Qantara.de, 2003). Saudi women's achievements in education are considerable. In reading Saudi newspapers one is fascinated by the number of highly educated women participating in the public affairs and requesting more room for their initiatives. Newspapers published in both Arabic and English have a great number of female writers. Indeed, the names of Saudi women are increasingly connected to appeals for more participation in public arenas and more respect for women in general. Furthermore, Talal Ibn AbdulAziz, the King's brother, continues efforts to change the status quo and to supports women's participation at all levels of Saudi society. Today he is the head of the region's most important organisation, The Arab Council for Childhood and Development, head of Arab Gulf Program for the Support of Humanitarian United Nations Organisations (AGFUND) and Rector of the Arab Open University, which serves not only Saudi citizens but the entire Arab world. At the Open University Talal hired two progressive Saudi women who hold doctoral degrees and support progress on women's issues²⁶.

²⁵ In the edited book *Feminism and Islam Legal and Literary Perspectives*.

²⁶ The first woman was Maha Orkubi, a professor of special education and was a Dean of AlHekma College for four years. The second Saudi elected women was Dr Smira Ibrahim Islam professor of King AbdulAziz University and a member of trustee for Arab Open University.

CONCLUSIONS

It is practically impossible to discuss women's education in Saudi Arabia without introducing the social and political forces that have shaped women's status not only in education but in society in general. Women's role in education in Saudi Arabia's conservative society, instead of serving as a tool for social change, serves as a force for conservation. Education entrenches and supports the prevailing class and gender structures and conforms to socio-economic and political expectations, and control mechanisms. As El-Sanabary (1992, p.149) suggests, education in Saudi Arabia is a 'microcosm'. Despite the fact that the society and the tradition favour men's education over women's, the disparity between boys and girls in the unequal distribution of educational funds is a logical reflection of gender hierarchies in the overall society. It is worth being optimistic. Altorki concludes in her research, on Saudi women with a note of optimism. She stresses the changes and improvements that have opened up more space for women in the public sphere (as cited in Afshar, 1993, p.13).

Looking at women's education in Saudi one should consider all sides of the issues. Studies have shown how women's education is taking another route. In his study (1975) entitled *Perception of Female Students from the Countries of the Arab Gulf*, Al Kotob interviewed 519 women students. He notes that 79 per cent of his respondents agreed strongly that women should have the same opportunities as men, 70 per cent insisted that Master's and Doctorate level degrees are suitable for women in the Gulf region, and 80 per cent indicated that university education should be co-educational. With regards to marriage, 94.8 per cent of the participants supported education prior to marriage. In relation to the subjects of study available to women, 94.2 per cent agreed that women should not be confined to certain subjects and should be able to study in any field. Sixty-six per cent of the participants believed that a husband's education should exceed that of his wife. However, research shows that economic problems may influence a social shift on issues around women's education. For example, many men consider a college or university graduate partner as a vital asset in a potential marriage, believing an educated woman can contribute to the income of the family (Abobaker as cited in Doumato, 2000). Ironically, a study by Abobaker on male university students conducted in 1980 showed that 70 per cent of men would not prefer to marry an educated college graduate, nor did they want their wives to participate in the house budget since they considered that a threat to their authority (Abobaker as cited in Doumato, 2000).

More recently, a question raised again and discussed in the Consultative Council concerning Saudi women's education was that if women stayed for too long in school (the average stay is 12 years before university) would they be considered undesirable for marriage? Would women with Master's and Doctoral level degrees have compromised their chances for marriage? Recent statistics released by the Saudi Ministry of Planning and Human Resources (2003) indicate that the number of single women is increasing dramatically. The primary reason being cited for this trend is the increase in women's education. The study also shows that the number of single women is climbing toward one third of the total number of women in the country. These unmarried women have passed what in Saudi Arabia is considered the marriageable age of 30 years. The projected numbers given for the end of 2002 was 1,813,000 women. This number was expected to increase to four million in five years unless the government supports plan to change the nation's view of educated women (Al Sari, 2003c).

Moreover, it is stunning how the issues of women's rights in Saudi Arabia have become a dominant subject in Western media. Why are Saudi women such a hot topic? Saudi women's education and issues guarantee the author a high publishing rate. In addition, many non-academic materials promote stereotypical images of Saudi women as exotic and erotic. These kinds of books and articles exacerbate the lives of Saudi women in their own country, especially in as much as they need the support of the international community in order to challenge the power of some conservative religious scholars and old 'sexist' traditions. Part of the media war used against Saudi Arabia does not care about women's rights as much as they care about political hegemony over the resources of the 'Third World' including Saudi oil. Be that as it may, an education system must carry out a mission to implement open-mindedness and understanding. This would allow students and the next generation to be strong in facing the challenge of Western hegemony. Western values might not be suitable for Saudi people, just as the views of conservative religious scholars and old traditions that favour men would not be suitable. There are conservative religious ideologies on both counts. On one side (in the Saudi view) are powerful conservative religious scholars, and on the other is the Bush ideology, "you're either with us or against us." Both are extreme and both are causing problems. The Saudi education system and curricula needs to implement different strategies for looking at the other people with whom we disagree. On a macro level, recent changes in the international arena have opened the door to changes that were not attainable in the recent past. Space is allowed in the Saudi press for honest reflection as never before. Saudi columnists are able to constructively criticise the system's performance in the health, education, and women's rights sectors. This is of itself 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.

The future developmental plans must be able to tackle problems of increased economic demands, segregation of the sexes, limitations of women's jobs and the cultural and religious heritage (Huyette, 1985). If the country plans to survive this globalised era women's education in all fields should be a priority. Educated open-minded individual's' demands would bring changes and progress but to what extent? Is Saudi society ready for that change? Given the apparent variability in perspective of Educated open-minded individual's' who are seeking progress, and the attitudes of some conservative religious scholars and old traditions which resist any move forward it is difficult to predict. Until then women's issues will be at the centre of conflict between modernity and tradition.

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