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Issue Brief

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Societal Change in Saudi Arabia: Changing the Norms

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On May 4, 2017 King Salman of Saudi Arabia passed a decree to repeal the male guardianship system in the country. According to MahaAkee Director of the Public Information and Communication



for the Jeddah-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation(OIC), the law now allows a woman, "to be her own guardian and take care of her official matter without the need for the approval of the guardian."¹

Social norms around the world are changing at such a rapid pace that to keep up, even the most rigid societies are now altering their customs. Saudi Arabia is one of those societies which stayed bound to its Islamic roots for decades. A Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, also known as Haia was established in 1940.² It had the right to stop and question, in fact even punish anyone anywhere on the slightest breach of Islamic laws. The worst target of these strict laws were the women of Saudi Arabia. These included, among others, a ban on travel without the consent of their legal guardian i.e. their husband or father, or engage in mixed gatherings. Even after the boom in their economy in the 1970's that led to the urbanization and modernization of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the religious establishment held strong control over the government and society.

For years, the Saudi women have been confined to the four walls of their homes. But, as is always the case in every society, there is inevitably a small group of people who become the base for change. In 1990, a small group of open-minded Saudi women, for the first time in the history of the Kingdom, demonstrated against the ban on driving.³ However, even at that time, these women were shunned by the government, religious authorities, and even most of the Saudi women, for this seemingly outrageous act. A reaction that can be understood as fear of westernization and losing of identity. These two

¹ <http://www.siasat.com/news/saudi-women-no-longer-need-consent-male-guardians-get-state-services-1185525/>

² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36101150>

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/10406572/Saudi-women-get-behind-the-wheel-for-driving-ban-protest.html>

concerns have always stood in the way of Saudi Arabia's social liberation. Despite this opposition, the wave of change had started.

The social media has also contributed to this change through applications like Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook, and the women of Saudi Arabia found alternative platforms to share their lives with the world and vice versa.

In 2005, the late king Abdullah of Saudi Arabia sent a number of Saudi women to study abroad.⁴ Since then, there has been a gradual increase in the number of Saudi women studying in various colleges and universities across the globe. These women became the face and voice of the campaign of Saudi women for their liberations and attainment of the basic rights that women in other countries enjoy.

Currently, Saudi women inside and outside the Kingdom are calling for removal of the guardianship system that restricts their movement both within the state and abroad.⁵ Both reformist religious scholars and lawyers in Saudi Arabia have acknowledged on a number of occasions that the guardianship system has no basis in Islam⁶. This is more of a cultural and societal norm. Therefore, the demand for removal of the travel ban has been trending on Twitter for more than 200 days now.

Another thing that the internet and social media have made possible was to reveal the real face of most of these religious authorities, which has resulted in the loss of the credibility of these religious authorities. When people saw them traveling around the world, using social media to promote their ideas and being part of mixed gatherings, they were forced to question the true intentions of these authorities. Were they only banning these media applications to keep their people in the dark, or were these really not good? If the latter was the case, then why were they themselves so actively involved in using these platforms for projection of their ideas.

Recently, under the leadership of King Salman, various new reforms have been introduced, among them is the Vision 2030 and National Transformation Program (NTP) which set out an ambitious road map for diversifying Saudi Arabia's oil based economy.⁷ The authorities in Saudi Arabia plan to grow their private sector and entice more Saudi nationals, including women, into these newly created workplaces. Among

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/23/world/middleeast/king-abdullah-who-nudged-saudi-arabia-forward-dies-at-90.html>

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/16/boxed/women-and-saudi-arabias-male-guardianship-system>

⁶ <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21718871-women-are-fed-up-being-treated-children-some-saudi-women-are-secretly>

⁷ <https://www.thenational.ae/business/saudi-leadership-shift-bolsters-economic-reforms-1.92710>

these reforms are plans to lift the travel ban and allowing women to travel and study abroad without the consent of a male guardian. This will also include allowing women to drive and provide transport for working women. Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal in Riyadh posted on his personal website "It is high time now that the Saudi women started driving their cars."⁸ Prince Al-Waleed may not be a government official, but such a statement coming from one of the richest and influential man of Saudi Arabia is certainly encouraging. He further stated that the economy of Saudi Arabia and the average household can benefit from this decision as roughly \$1000 a month is paid to a driver. This amount can be saved and women can have their freedom as well.⁹

It was among all this social chatter that on May 4, 2017, King Salman issued a decree concerning opportunities for women in the country. This decree is divided into two parts. The first part of the decree orders the government to enlist services that a woman can seek from the government without the permission of her male guardian. The second is about providing transport to female employees as women are not allowed to drive.¹⁰ These may not seem like very prominent changes to someone living outside of Saudi Arabia. But for the Saudi women, it is a drastic step in their struggle for liberation. With the new decree in place, they may be able to start small businesses, obtain a passport or even travel on their own without permission from their male guardian.

This decree came right after the controversial election of Saudi Arabia at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. The UN and concerned authorities were faced with a great backlash from the global community and women rights organizations on the inclusion of Saudi Arabia into the Commission with regard to the status of Saudi women at home. Maybe it was this ironic situation that became the basis for King Salman's new approach towards the status of women in the country.

The new social, political and economic changes in Saudi Arabia are a sign of a healthy socio-cultural development. The perfect alliance between the religious establishment and government which was once considered to be unbreakable is now developing some cracks. The role of Haia had been reduced in 2016 by the Saudi government. Previously, the controversial religious police were allowed to detain people. Now, officers of the Haia force, also known as the Mutawaa, must 'carry out the duties of

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/30/saudi-prince-alwaleed-bin-talal-says-high-time-women-allowed/>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/?toURL=https://www.forbes.com/sites/ellenwald/2017/05/05/is-driving-next-saudi-arabia-relaxes-rules-for-women/&refURL=https://www.google.com/&referrer=https://www.google.com/>

encouraging virtue and forbidding vice by advising kindly and gently' under the new rules. They can now only report any person violating any law to the police, reducing their prior authority of questioning, detaining or chasing any individual.

Another recent development is the establishment of General Authority for Entertainment (GAE). This authority has been organizing a number of concerts and other social events within the country. The new authority has also faced backlash from religious clerics and even Saudi citizens who consider such events to be against the teachings of Islam. They also think these activities are degrading the moral values of the Saudi people and promoting westernization. The social activist women in Saudi Arabia are of the view that their issues are far greater than the need for entertainment. While the Saudi government says that granting women rights could be the next move in this reforms process, this however, may not be a simple process. According to Dr. Lama Al Sulaiman, former deputy chairwoman of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce & Industry, "Modernization of Saudi Arabia is like Rehabilitation, and rehabilitation is a painful and difficult process."¹¹

These changes have not come overnight, nor did the society in Saudi Arabia get there in a short span of time. With growing emphases on human rights and women rights all around the globe, such a change was inevitable, and it was only a matter of time before the Saudi Kingdom had to make these reforms. Furthermore, these changes will present new opportunities for the growth of Saudi women. With more exposure and awareness, the coming generations would be more enlightened compared to their predecessors. This could result in a more developed and participatory Saudi society.

Hopefully, the new policies will open the world not only for the Saudi society and women in particular, but also open the Saudi society and culture for the world.

¹¹ <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/content/376682-modernising-saudi-arabia-is-like-rehabilitation>