



كلية الآداب والعلوم
College of Arts and Sciences
QATAR UNIVERSITY جامعة قطر

مركز دراسات الخليج
Gulf Studies Center

Dynamics of Gender Roles in Saudi Arabia

Sahar El Sayed

GULF STUDIES CENTER

Policy Brief

Cluster: Culture and Society

No.16 September 2023



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Sahar El Sayed¹

Introduction

Gender roles and women's rights in the Gulf region have been one of the most controversial issues within Middle East studies in general and Gulf Studies in particular. Gender roles, as a social construct, are built through a dynamic process and are subject to change, development and maturation through generational interaction and long social processes. Notably, gender exceeds women's roles, as it also includes men's roles and the social mechanisms generated by the dynamic relations between men and women within the frameworks of the existing culture and social norms. Gender roles and perceptions are constructed and shaped in long interaction processes through generations, impacted by culture, history, religion, modernity, and the social institutions in general (Cornwall, 2016; Gharaibeh, 2015; Rahman & Al-Azm, 2023; Sonbol, 2012).

In the Gulf region, where nomadic Bedouin lifestyles prevailed for centuries, we find that tribalism, the old Arabic culture, and Islam, are all factors that impacted the formation of gender roles. A culturally conservative society where identity, kinship, norms, and traditions are highly respected have produced a patriarchal, protective approach towards women, where men normally feel responsible for their female family members and relatives (Peterson, 2020).

Muslim women in general and women in the Gulf region in particular are normally portrayed negatively in the Western mainstream academic discourse as suppressed, uneducated and falling completely under an unjust, strict patriarchal system. This is thoroughly explained by Edward Said in his famous book on Orientalism (Said, 1978). In this book Said analyzed Orientalism as a male preserve, a discourse articulated mostly by men. This discourse feminized the orient, attributing to it certain qualities representing women as irrational, licentious, and exotic, where women are exploited as objects of

¹ Ph.D. Scholar at the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University

sexual desire and kept hidden in the harem (Weber, 2001). Sadly, also Western feminists adopted the premises of their culture towards Muslim women. In this concern Leila Ahmed pointed to their “complicity in perpetuating an image of Islam as monolithic and unchanging, a powerful force that not only prevents Islamic societies from emulating “progress”, of the West, but that also keeps women in a state of object slavery” (Ahmed,1982). In line with this argument, it is evident that Western mainstream academia tends to ignore the recent social change and progress in the region triggered by modernity, technological advancements, and globalization. The perception of gender roles, especially women’s roles, have been reshaped in modern times, because of several factors. Firstly, the Gulf societies have undergone deep social, economic, and political transformations in the recent decades, especially since the beginning of the 21st century. Secondly, the region, as elsewhere, has been subjected to the flows of globalization and modernization that also impacted the social structures, including gender roles of both women and men alike. Thirdly, the official authorities in the respective countries have paid a significant attention the past two decades to gender equality, women’s education and participation in the public sphere and labor force. These efforts aiming to generally improve Khaliji women’s situation was culminated by issuing new laws, imposing quota systems in elections, and the appointment of female officials in higher governmental positions (Al-Sabah, 2013; Metcalfe, 2011; Mohiuddin, 2016). This was clearly reflected in the national vision plans of all the Arab Gulf states: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman.

This paper will use Saudi Arabia as a case study to analyze the role played by the state in reshaping gender roles and perceptions. The employed methodology of this paper relies on a descriptive literature analysis and statistics. . The paper will first provide a historical analysis of the construction of gender roles in the Gulf until modern times, then an analysis of Saudi Arabia as a case study and finally will conclude with a summary of the findings, future prospects, and some final thoughts on policy recommendations.

Historical analysis of gender roles in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia until modern times

Geography has for long dominated and shaped the lifestyles and community relations in this area of the world since antiquity. Harsh climate, and water scarcity made the peoples of the region move and adopt nomadic lifestyles to survive. The people who inhabited close to the shores turned to the waters of the Gulf for living, through fishing and later pearling, leading to the rise of trade and merchandizing in a later stage. Shore communities flourished and a settled society came about because of the people's dependence on each other for survival and security. While men who mainly worked with pearling or as merchants (Tujjar) travelled in long journeys that could last for months, women stayed back home with full responsibility of the house, the children, and eventually also the servants. In that era of time, women in the Gulf region had shared duties with men and had the entire responsibility for the household and the people in it solely for months every year (Peterson, 2009; 2016).

In the interior land communities, away from the shores, the situation wasn't much different. The tribes moved around looking for water; men taking care of their cattle, while women ran the household and took care of the children. Women also engaged in small basic production at home such as dairy production, carpets, and some ceramic handcrafts like pots. Additionally, families used to trade milk and dates with other goods depending on their needs. As seen here, Bedouin women significantly contributed to the household and the domestic economy of the family and the tribe (Peterson, 2009; 2016).

Insofar, tribalism is usually connected to strong social ties among the tribe members, strong sense of belonging and loyalty to the tribe, and strict and highly respected social norms and traditions prevailed. Gender roles under this social construction were clear-cut, straight forward and dominant in the society; a strong hierarchal patriarchal system came about, where the father or the grandfather is considered the head of the family and the highest authority. During this period, it was unusual for women to marry outside the tribe, and marriage was normally within the close kinships. These social patterns of gender roles within the families and the society triumphed in the region for centuries.

Meanwhile, the pearling industry collapsed in the 1930s, this has forced huge migration waves from the shore areas to the interior lands, Qatar for example, lost almost 20% of its inhabitants, who moved to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. One of the most important factors that shaped the social, economic, and political structures in the Gulf was the discovery of oil, first in Iran in 1903, then in the rest of the region. The region which for long laid in the backwaters of the world, became the center of attention for the superpowers and a popular destination for the international oil consortiums. This is considered a milestone in shaping the social structures and cultures of the nations of the region. The region gradually began to be subjected to Western influence and massive migration from India, Persia, and East Asia. With the exception of Saudi Arabia (1932), Kuwait (1961), and Oman, all the nation states in the Gulf were established in 1971 (Qatar, Bahrain, and UAE). The establishment of nation states and the oil revenues impacted the social structures in the Gulf States deeply (Peterson, 2009; 2016). The states instituted a rentier system, offering the citizens generous welfare systems and financial support. The accumulated wealth, globalization and massive investment in infrastructure have turned the societies upside down in many ways. The towns and cities became international hubs with massive migration. In the middle of this, gender roles also developed; women are no longer responsible for the housework, as average families would have servants and maids. The strict dress codes have started to loosen up and women have started to go outside the house to participate in the public sphere through both work and education. The impact of western values of gender equality, women's rights and modern ideas through the cinema and social media impacted the whole Middle East, and the Gulf region isn't an exception to it. Modern lifestyles have been adopted and women were, in a later stage, granted the right to vote in the elections in most of the Gulf countries. Some countries use quota system to guarantee the representation of women in the consultative and Shura Majlises.

Meanwhile, the road is not only covered with roses, but it has also had challenges that are still being faced today.. There are cultural challenges such as the clash between modernization and identity, the social resistance to change, and the negative impact of globalization on local social structures (Bartky, & Meacham, 1992). The states of the Gulf have initiated ambitious national policies to enhance a modern vision of gender roles that

serve their national agendas, with Saudi Arabia in the forefront. The next section of the paper will analyze Saudi Arabia's national policies as a case study.

An analysis of the National Policies of Saudi Arabia regarding gender roles

Saudi Arabia has been portrayed as one of the strictest countries when it comes to women's rights and gender segregation rules. The kingdom has, in the last decade, developed a series of law reforms and state political strategies to change the situation. A royal decree was issued in 2017 granting Saudi women the right to drive after June 2018, making the country the last one in the world where women were banned from driving cars (Wheeler, 2020). This was only the beginning. In his important book about Political Islam and the rise of the Saudi kingdom, Mohamed Ayoob states that the kingdom, that was established for the third time in 1932, has been known for its ultra conservative policies and was also imposing strict dress codes and rules for gender segregation. The kingdom rose after an alliance between Al Saud tribe and a religious establishment adopting the doctrine of Wahhabism. These regulations were guarded by a group of clergies called "Motawaeen" in Arabic, which means "institution for imposing good deeds and preventing bad deeds" (Ayoob, 2008).

The situation has changed after a feminist movement that strived after more openness in the public sphere began in the late 1990s. This movement worked hard for the cause of women and the right to obtain driving licenses for over two decades. After Mohamed Bin Salman was installed as a crown prince and being the de -facto ruler of the kingdom since 2017, gender roles and women's rights have gained a huge momentum. It became one of the main concerns of the regime in its quest for modernization and the new state image they seek to present – a modernized strong state, with a strong diversified economy, and equal citizens. The objectives are not merely moral or driven by a state propaganda, but they are also significantly economy-driven, for example granting women to drive was meant to increase women's participation in the workforce to 29% (GAS: KSA General Authority for Statistics). In addition, allowing women to drive would reduce the families' dependence on foreign drivers and save over 100 million dollars a year (Williams, Qiu, Al-awwad, & Alfayez, 2019). Saudi Arabia issued a national vision

plan called vision 2030, where gender roles and women's development were in the forefront. The vision included increasing women's participation in higher education. Female students constituted over 50% of registered students in higher education in the kingdom in 2022 (nearly 600 000) (GAS: KSA General Authority for Statistics, 2022). Other social reforms were initiated to make the work environment more accessible to Saudi women as a part of a strategic policy aims to decrease the reliance on foreign workers through what came to be called: *Saudization*.

Gender roles as mentioned earlier are social constructs, that religion, culture and social norms and traditions help in shaping; as well as attitudes, approaches, and feelings. The Saudi society lived long under a strict role of guardianship and movement restriction of women, who needed a companionship of a male guardian. Saudi Arabia is gradually lifting these rules to meet the international human rights standards. Meanwhile, it is worth mentioning that these changes can meet strong societal resistance when it is imposed from the top down, they are not considered a genuine social development from within. In this concern, several polls and studies by some Saudi universities and Western scholars , showed that these changes don't have a vast social support from the society. This indicates that the Saudi society is still conservative in nature, and that tribalism and cultural conservatism still runs the show. These tendencies are still existing despite the approach of the Saudi government to loosen up the strict dress codes and guardian rules, as well as increasing women's participation in the public sphere, like nominating women to vital positions in the government including KSA ambassadors to the US, and the UN.

Final Thoughts

Saudi Arabia has recently adopted state policies and strategies aiming at presenting a new state image of the kingdom as a modern state, abiding by the international laws when it comes to gender equality and women's rights. The kingdom has issued a series of reforms to raise women's participation in the labor force, education, and public sphere. On the top of these reforms was the royal decree granting women the right to drive issued by King Salman in September 2017. Saudi authorities affirm that women's role in the development plans of the kingdom and the 2030 vision are essential

on the social front, and most importantly, in the economic sectors as well. Saudi women have since then had, higher participation in the labor force (29%), and in education. The Saudi government seeks to substitute a big portion of foreign workers in the country with Saudi women in what they call *Saudization*. The regime also has appointed prominent Saudi women in critical positions in the government, such as the KSA ambassadors to the US, and the UN.

However, there are certain challenges to this process. Firstly, the social resistance in the society, since this is a process imposed from the top down; social development normally takes decades and generations to be integrated genuinely in the society. Secondly, tribalism and cultural conservatism remain influential forces in the society, regardless the official policies of the government. Change starts normally through educating the new generations if a change in the attitudes and norms is to be achieved. Most importantly, these changes might cause an identity dilemma among the new generations in the Saudi society, where culture, religion and social norms have been dominant factors for centuries. Preserving the fine line between modernity and the need to keeps the nation's national identity and cultural heritage is not an easy task, yet it is vital.

Insofar, what are the prospects for gender roles in the future in Saudi Arabia? One cannot state a clear- cut answer. Meanwhile, the Saudi policies towards modernization will continue in the near future, reshaping the social constructions, including gender perceptions among new generations. Saudi women are expected to gain more rights and participate more in the public sphere and politics as well as education and workforce. On the other hand, social resistance as a result of the particularity of the Saudi society will continue, and the conflict between modernity and identity will shape the development of gender roles in Saudi Arabia, as well as the rest of the Gulf States.

In conclusion, the major transformations in women's situation in Saudi Arabia since the rise of the crown prince, Mohamed Bin Salman, have been a central derive in the modernization efforts in the kingdom since 2015. Finally, the world system is going through a crisis nowadays because of the war in Ukraine and the global economic crisis, a new world order might be shaping the next decades with new ideals and standards. In these constrained conditions it is important to keep a good balance between

modernization and development in one hand, and the nation's own identity and cultural heritage in the other.

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