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Gender-Segregated Education in Saudi Arabia:
Its Impact on Social Norms and the Saudi Labor Market

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Abstract
This article examines the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's gender-segregated higher education system and how it is used to transmit the Kingdom's traditional societal expectations to the employment sector. With Saudi Arabia's current need for economic change, the education system is retarding instead of accelerating reform. A background consisting of Saudi Arabian history, governing laws, religious beliefs and women's roles is examined. I then discuss the education system's preservation goal by considering segregation, women's mobility, videoconferencing courses, and the roles of professors. I attempt to explain how the current education system fails to prepare its students for the global economy: by limiting women's access to the labor market, and by not preparing men for the realities of the global market and therefore creating the need for migrant workers. In conclusion, conserving culture is significant, but for economic change to occur, the extent of cultural conservatism and its effect on the education system need to be re-evaluated.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, headed by the Al Saud royal family, with a council of ministers. Saudi Arabia's strong roots in religious and tribal histories date back to the eighteenth century with the joining of the first Ibn Saud to Muhammad ben Abdel Wahab. Ibn Saud was the ruler of the town of Dariya in Najd (AlMunajjed, 1997). Muhammad ben Abdel Wahab was a religious fundamentalist reformer who changed the worship and social practices of Sunni Islam. He was

viewed as a *Mujaddid*, a voice that is sent by God at the on-set of every century to remind Muslims to return to the true revelations of the *Qur'an*. Together, these two formed the religious movement called *Wahabi* (Cordesman, 2003)—also known as *Salafi* in the Arab world (Del Castillo, 2003)—which Saudi Arabia follows today. These two were unhappy with the decline of social virtues in the eighteenth century and wanted to bring back the 'Golden Age of Islam,' an age of happiness in its simplicity and strict orthodoxy. They both attained this goal and "the union of ideology and military force led to the birth of a state: Saudi Arabia," (AlMunajjed, 1997). In 1932, Abdel Aziz ben Saud consolidated the entire peninsula and proclaimed himself King of Saudi Arabia (Cordesman, 2003).

Saudi Arabia was economically weak, yet militarily and politically strong. It was not until 1938 that oil was discovered and led to a major economic boom in the 1970s. With this boom came the construction of houses, schools, and universities. Consequently, tribal authority was weakened since labor needs increased in the cities, and many people had to move away from their traditional areas in order to work. Moreover, the new economy created an inflow of foreign workers who came to help develop the country (AlMunajjed, 1997).

Presently, Saudi Arabia is one of the richest countries in the world and a major economic and political influence. Its status in the Islamic world is very strong and has also led to an increase in its participation in international relations. Being that it is the custodian of Meccah and Medinah, the two cities where Islam was born in the sixth century with the Prophet Muhammad and Islam's holy book, The *Qur'an* (AlMunajjed, 1997), Saudi Arabia is considered the keeper of the Islamic religion. With that title comes a great deal of responsibility including the preservation of the Muslim religion.

As a means of preservation, Saudi Arabia has adopted the *Qur'an* and the Prophet's *Hadith* (written record of Muhammad's declarations) as its Basic Law of Government. It is based on equality in accordance with the Islamic *Shari'a*, or Islamic law. The State's role is to protect Islam and implement its *Shari'a*. The State will order its "people to do right and shun evil; it fulfils the duty regarding God's call," (Jerichow, 1998). The State will protect human rights as accorded by the *Shari'a*.

The history of the development of the *Shari'a* claims that the *Shari'a* is man-made. It is based on the interpretation of the divine messages of the Prophet. The *Shari'a* was always supplemented by the thoughts and beliefs of Muslim men until it was finally decided that the Islamic laws were no longer negotiable by ordinary Muslim men, and the rules of the *Shari'a* were thought to be finally settled (Jerichow, 1998). There is constant contention in all Arab and foreign literature over the Islamic position on women. To understand this controversy, it is important to eschew all generalizations about women in Islam, and to understand first, what is the actual teaching of Islam and second, what is the *Wahabi* interpretation of Islam.

Prior to the *Qur'an*, women "lived in subjugation and degradation," (AlMunajjed, 1997). The *Qur'an* gave women equal, but not identical, rights with men on personal, civil, social, and political levels. The *Qur'an* gave both genders duties to an equal degree. Women have the right to join in prayers in the *mosque* (religious temple) and to go on a pilgrimage to Meccah. Neither the *Qur'an* nor the *Hadith* prevented women from joining in public life. However, the *Qur'an* did warn that the mixing of the sexes could lead to "seduction and the 'evil consequences' that might follow," (AlMunajjed, 1997). The Prophet was a proponent of modest clothing, but did not specify veiling the face (Yamami, 1996)—in fact, the Prophet's wives did not veil their faces (AlMunajjed, 1997).

According to the *Qur'an*, Islam strongly believes in mandatory education for both men and women. A women needs to be educated in order to achieve perfection. Additionally, The *Qur'an* states that women have the right to work, and may work in commerce, industry, and agriculture as long as their work does not harm themselves, nor their family (AlMunajjed, 1997).

Wahabism, in its strict orthodoxy, interpreted the *Qur'an*'s warning about the mixing of sexes by tightly restricting any type of interaction among unmarried and unrelated men and women (Del Castillo, 2003). The Arabs adopted the custom of veiling the face from past civilizations whose elite used to cover themselves as a sign of status and prestige (Afkhami, 1995).

In *Wahabi* Saudi Arabia, women, including foreigners, may not drive; and they may risk arrest for

riding in a vehicle not driven by a chauffeur or a close male relative (Yamami, 1996). Women are not allowed to board public transportation in order to travel between different parts of the country or abroad without written permission from their closest male relative. Men can travel anywhere. Women are restricted in the use of public transportation when in the presence of men: they must enter the buses by a separate entrance in the back and occupy designated seating (Jerichow, 1998). The reason for such mobility restrictions on women is due to Saudi society's strong belief in family honor. The pride and honor of a woman's family is directly related to her chastity, known as *ird*. Arab "sensitivity to *ird* is so great that an entire way of life has been built around it. Saudi society is structured to keep a woman within strictly defined limits that make it difficult if not impossible for her to lose her sexual virtue." (Mackey, 2002) These restrictions strongly impact the education and employment of Saudis, especially women.

The Saudi Arabian Education System: Conserving Society and Culture

In Saudi society and culture, a woman's primary role is that of nurturing mother and housewife (Sabbagh, 1996). Therefore, the marginalization of women's education helped Saudi culture until the 1950s when a group of young educated middle-class men appealed to the government to establish schools for girls. They were voicing their desire for educated wives who would benefit the family, the children, and the harmony of the marriage. A social problem was revealing itself; Saudi men were marrying educated foreign women, and Saudi girls were remaining single (AlMunajjed, 1997). The first public schools for girls were not established before the early 1960s. Gradually, a separate girls' education system developed that now offers free schooling from primary school to the doctoral level (Sabbagh, 1996).

As of 1997, Saudi Arabia had seven universities with 68 colleges and another 61 women-only colleges (Jerichow, 1998). Based on the Saudi Arabian Information Resource website, in 1998, the King Khaled bin Abdul Aziz University was founded for a total of eight universities. It also has 56 specialized colleges for fields such as health, teacher training, and technology, and 70 technical centers for agriculture, commerce, and industry (Jerichow, 1998).

> The number of males graduating annually from university rose from 795 in 1970 to 21,229 in 1999, while the number of female graduates rose from 13 to 21,721 – ending in a total that slightly exceeded the number of male graduates.

> The number of Saudi women graduating from university has grown at an average rate 2.5 times that of male graduates during the last decade….(Cordesman, 2003)

Social and professional restrictions on women are enabling them to stay in school longer than men and to receive higher degrees (Cordesman, 2003). However, the education that they are receiving maintains societal expectations and imposes limitations on women.

As mentioned above, the *Shari'a* is embodied in Saudi education programs, and the goal of education is to instill in Saudi society a particular vision of the moral and religious life. One way in which education is being used to preserve *Wahabi* Saudi society and culture is through segregation of the sexes. The education system treats the sexes differently due to their different societal expectations. Males and females are directed into different courses by a differential tracking system. Males are taught about male activities; and females, about their nurturing roles as mothers and housewives. Even the curricula in universities differ for women and men based on the courses available to each to take (AlMunajjed, 1997). Although women are now receiving an education, that education is still dictated by *Wahabi* beliefs.

Another *Wahabi* belief, that was mentioned earlier, is that of mobility: women in Saudi Arabia do not have easy access to transportation. This can impair their education and is a second way in which education is being used as a societal control. While distance education was available at different times at three of the eight universities, as of 1991, only the King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah offers such a program. Therefore, in order to attend a university, a women needs to have a chauffeur or a readily available relative, to drive her to and from the campus. Some universities, such as King Saud

University in Riyadh, offer limited on-campus residential accommodations for female students who do not live nearby (Rawaf and Simmons, 1991). However, very few Saudi women can utilize such accommodations given the fact that many families reject even the thought of their daughters living outside their home (Sabbagh, 1996), harkening back to the idea of family honor. The problem of mobility can completely restrict some women's access to education.

A third way that social and cultural conservatism is applied by the education system is through the use of videoconferencing. The use of this modern innovation to "uphold ancient social practices," began due to a shortage of female professors (Mackey, 2002).

> This phenomenon came into existence in the Saudi higher education system solely because it accommodates the reception by female students of televised lectures conducted by male instructors…[through the] live transmission of video and audio signals from specially equipped classes attended by male students to female classes. (Nakshabandi, 1993)

This videoconferencing method allows instruction without the teacher and the students ever meeting face-to-face (Mackey, 2002). Whenever direct contact with male professors is deemed absolutely necessary, such as in areas of medicine and business, it is reluctantly and warily permitted. Otherwise, the use of videoconferencing is strongly recommended (Nakshabandi, 1993).

Each one of these classrooms is attended by the male professor and his male students. A fixed remote-controlled video camera is provided as well as a receive-only telephone line. The professor clips the portable lavaliere onto his clothing; the microphone is "linked by cable to studio sound-input," (Nakshabandi, 1993). This setup allows him to be the only one to hear his female students and to only be able to contact them by being videotaped. The corresponding classroom in the girls' facilities is composed of several tables, each seating three to four girls. On each table there is a color television monitor and a one-way telephone line that may be used to contact the professor by lifting the receiver. This setup ensures that only the girls can see the professor and begin a conversation with him. The girls can hear each other's questions, but in the male classroom, only the professor can hear them. If he so chooses, he may relay the posed question to his male students. The girls' classrooms are usually supervised by a female teacher's aid who keeps attendance and order, and supervises tests (Nakshabandi, 1993).

Some of the criticisms of such a teaching method are that 1) communication is difficult because of classroom noise, 2) boredom kicks in due to a lack of participation, and 3) there is no group discussion possible (Rawaf, 1991). In Abdussalam Nakshabandi's (1993) paper, *Videoconferencing; King Saud University (Saudi Arabia)*, an older study by Alsaadat and Afifi concluded that female students thought it difficult to read the blackboard and simultaneously watch the professor on the television screen; that professors felt that the majority of class-time was used to focus on the female students; that all the professors and the majority of male and female students felt that an extensive amount of time was wasted in repeating female students' questions to male students; and that simultaneous instruction affects comprehension negatively for males, but positively for females (Nakshabandi, 1993). This last conclusion comes as no surprise if female students monopolize most of class time. This third way of conserving *Wahabi* society does however have a positive effect on the education of women; it promotes it, as opposed to the first two ways mentioned (segregation and lack of mobility) which retard it.

A fourth and final way that education maintains the *Wahabi* status quo is through the roles imposed on male and female professors. In an interview with Dr. Mariam Al-Jawini, the Deputy Principal of the Girls School at The Islamic Saudi Academy in Alexandria, Virginia, she divulged, although her experience is some 25 years old at this point, that the role of the female professor was not taken as seriously as the role of the male professor. For example, grading. After grading her students' exams, the female professor had to submit them for review by a male professor. This is similar to the situation in which the testimony of a woman in court is worth half the man's testimony (Joseph, 2000). Where men are the bread winners and women the nurturers, Dr. Al-Jawini also claims that the university system is tougher on males than females: for the same results on a test, a male student will get a lower grade than the female student.

The role of the teacher echoes Saudi society's conservative nature. When teaching, professors have to watch what they are saying to both male and female students. They cannot always say what they want to say; they have to say what should be said. An example is a male anthropology professor's class discussion with his male students on Darwin's theory of evolution and the missing link, " 'I had to explain what Darwin thought but at the same time say, 'as Muslims we don't agree with that, but I have to teach you about Darwin so you're aware of what he said,' " (Del Castillo, 2003). Saudi society is not only preserved through education by promoting segregation and enforcing the restrictions on women's mobility, but also through the professor's role as an educator.

The Saudi Arabian Education System: Its Failure to Prepare Saudis for the Global Economy

Although women constitute 58 percent of all university graduates in Saudi Arabia, their educational background still does not guarantee them a job after graduation. The Saudi education system limits women's access to labor markets and participation in the global economy. The education system does so in two ways. The first way is by restricting women's entry into certain fields of study. Women are excluded from studying engineering, journalism, pharmacy, and architecture. Such fields are reserved for the men (Cordesman, 2003), as are the better research and laboratory facilities. Women appear to be studying dentistry, education, medicine, nursing, and public administration among a few other professions. "In some fields of study, such as natural and social sciences, the number of female university graduates exceeds the number of male graduates. In these areas women now represent a major and underutilized human resource," (AlMunajjed, 1997). According to available data, women are being trained by and large for teaching and clerical jobs and this is "limiting their access to the labor market," (Cordesman, 2003). The rationale for this tracking appears to be that

> …these occupations are an extension of women's domestic roles, and utilize the stereotypical women's qualities of caring, nurturing, and service to others. They are also deemed culturally and religiously appropriate because they help maintain gender-segregation through women's work with other women in segregated work environments. (Sabbagh, 1996)

This leads to the second way in which education limits women's accessibility to the job market: by restricting their access to certain jobs. The increasing minority of females aspiring to a career in a nontraditional field will most likely be subjected to discrimination and will probably end up working in education or healthcare (Budhwar and Yaw, 2001), or in business, retail sales, or the media which offer fewer opportunities (Jerichow, 1998). Their other option would be to become active in women's charitable societies (Afkhami, 1995).

There is a productivity crisis in the Saudi labor force due to the status of female employment in the country and the lack of rapid changes that "are needed to take advantage of the comparatively high educational standards of young Saudi women," (Cordesman, 2003). By limiting women's access to the labor market through restrictions on certain areas of study and on access to certain jobs, education is not preparing Saudi women for the global economy and is once again only helping to preserve the socially accepted status quo.

Not only is education not preparing women, it is also not preparing men for the realities of the global labor market. Until recently, most young affluent Saudis believed that they did not have to work, and if they did, that they need not apply themselves because they did not need to climb the corporate ladder. They would go straight "from school to an executive suite," (Viviano, 2003). Economists are now saying that the educational system is failing to meet the demands of modern industry. "The companies who come to us are looking for skilled workers, business grads, engineers, and technicians," said Nasser Salih al-Homoud, director of an unemployment office in Buraydah, and "few Saudis qualify," (Viviano, 2003). The problem is that these young Saudis took their bachelor's degree in Islamic philosophy (Viviano, 2003) or in whatever minimal degree is needed for a public sector career. The reality is that the education system is not preparing Saudi men for the occupational needs of their kingdom's economy, specifically for the private sector. The Islamic Philosophy degree has become a useless field and a joke. Such lack of appropriate occupational education has created the need for migrant workers in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia estimates the number of guest workers at 7 million in a population of 16 million (Pressure in Saudi Arabia, 2000). These foreign workers have filled positions in the oil and banking sectors (Jerichow, 1998) and occupy roles as corporate managers, engineers, physicians, and scientists. They are provided extravagant salaries with great benefits (Viviano, 2003). Some foreign laborers also work in jobs that are not desirable to young Saudis due to their lack of social value (Cordesman, 2003).

Saudi Arabia is looking for economic change. The government is working on developing a Saudi workforce by encouraging Saudi nationals to participate in all sectors of the economy. Saudi nationals replacing foreign workers is also known as *Saudization*. *Saudization* is said to require a higher level of participation by both genders (AlMunajjed, 1997). The government has made certain occupations only available to Saudi citizens, has increased some work visa fees, and has set minimum wages on some jobs in order to increase the employer's cost when using foreign labor (Jerichow, 1998). In order to achieve the substantial change that the country is looking for, the Kingdom needs to re-evaluate its education system. Its contribution to the *Saudization* process must assessed, specifically in training and educating Saudis in fields necessary to achieve maximum workforce capabilities and in promoting the expansion of the private sector, which has the potential to create many local jobs but lacks skilled Saudi workers (Looney, 2004).

The responsibility of higher education should be to replace these foreign laborers with qualified Saudi men and women. (Pressure in Saudi Arabia, 2000) The International Labor Organization and the World Bank published studies in the late 1990s suggesting that the Saudi education system was deteriorating and failing to properly prepare males and females for future jobs. Between 1995 and 1999, out of 114,000 graduates, only 10,000 graduated with engineering degrees as opposed to 48,000 with social science and literature degrees (Cordesman, 2003). "There's a need to minimize the skill mismatches between what the education and training systems are producing and the needs of employers in the private sector," (Al Ajaji, 1995). Men and women need to access jobs that are competitive in the market, that utilize the education and training of the new Saudi generation, and that deliver valuable profits. "*Saudization* that menializes the native Saudi workforce is the last thing the kingdom needs." (Cordesman, 2003) The Saudi American Bank has estimated unemployment to be about 15 to 20 percent for males between the ages of 20 and 29. If women were to be included, this average would increase significantly. More than 100,000 Saudi males enter the workforce annually, but the private sector is only producing enough employment for one out of three job seekers. *The Economist* in 2000 estimated that the Saudi economy should grow by six percent annually to create enough jobs for the young male Saudis entering the labor market. In reality, the Saudi economy has been growing by an average rate of two to zero percent (Budhwar and Yaw, 2001). According to the World Bank, the per capita GDP growth of Saudi Arabia could have been .7 percent higher had there been fewer barriers to the employment of women (Islam, 2003).

The education system must focus on the needs of the private sector, since this is where new jobs will be created. Presently, the education system is producing too many graduates that are only qualified to work in the public sector. By changing the focus of education to fit the needs of the private sector, there will be an increase in research and development and an increase in private sector opportunities that will require a decreased use of foreign labor and an increased use of Saudis, men and women (Looney, 2004).

As Saudi Arabia expands its economy and its private sector, more opportunities are likely to arise for women due to the Kingdom loosening its employment policies. This liberalization will occur once *Saudization* takes its toll on guest workers and frees up more jobs for Saudis, and when private sector opportunities increase. Some might say that gender roles will remain constant since Saudi Arabia is intent on preserving its traditional values (Jerichow, 1998), but others see the roles changing slowly: in 1990, 47 percent of university graduates in medicine were women (Joseph, 2000).

> The patient, … a man … The doctor, a female physician who makes house calls. The scene reflects how gender roles are slowly changing in the medical profession – women not only work elbow-to-elbow with men, but treat them too. Yet other norms haven't changed at all. (Kingdom on Edge, 2002)

Conclusion

Education by itself does not increase jobs and cannot always predict the needs of the economy. Adding the cultural and social barriers that exist in Saudi Arabia to the mix, it is difficult to predict where Saudi Arabia is heading. Will *Saudization* succeed and make available many job opportunities for young male and female Saudis? Will education focus more on the needs of the economy as opposed to the acceptable norms of Saudi society? Will the government relax its social restrictions on women to accommodate its economic needs? The Saudi government is looking for economic change. In order for such a change to occur, the education system needs to be re-evaluated. Preserving society and culture is important, but the extent of preservation needs to be revisited in order for education to prepare both men and women for life in the global economy.

Female participation in the labor market is still very low. The Saudi government has been creating new jobs for women. Changes to women's rights have been occurring, though at a snail's pace; but as a Saudi businessman once said, "'You should think of Saudi as a kind of giant Vatican City. Only then can you begin to understand its conservatism.'" (Islam, 2003)

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