

The Changing Status of Women in the Middle East

Regretfully, many repressive, prohibitive, restrictive laws, rules and practices on women are associated with the Muslim world today. Numerous traditions and customs, from the pre-Islamic male-dominant tribal culture, have been the main foundation of this despotic mentality which women have been subjected to for centuries, supposedly in the name of Islam. In reality, they contradict, entirely, the essence of Islam.

However, there have been very promising initiatives that have aimed to soften, or even completely abolished, some of the strict rules that severely limit women's rights and freedoms in various Muslim countries, especially in the past year. Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia are among the countries where these positive developments have taken place.

One of the most talked about countries, in terms of the revolutionary reforms it has enacted in the field of women's freedoms in the recent period, is undoubtedly Saudi Arabia. There have been pleasant developments in Saudi Arabia recently that can be considered a first in the history of the kingdom. Important steps taken to improve women's rights and freedoms are at the forefront of these firsts.

In the past few years, the decision to offer physical education to girls in public schools was one of these firsts. The Ministry of Education announced that from the next academic year onwards, physical education classes, specifically for girls, will be introduced to the curriculum in public schools, and the necessary facilities will be provided. The statement came just after King Salman's decision to soften the kingdom's guardianship laws so that women in the country would be able to access health and education services without the consent of a male [guardian](#).

The ministry stated that "...introducing sports classes in girls schools come as part of the kingdom's "Vision 2030" plan for economic and social reforms." As a matter of fact, a Saudi state school actually introduced sports for girls back in 2014, but after a consultative council advised against it at that time, the practice was [scrapped](#).

It seems that the strategy of "Vision 2030", an initiative backed by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, is progressing strongly and is having concrete and constructive effects, despite the objections of the conservative opposition.

Women being allowed to enter the International King Fahd Stadium in Riyadh, as members of the audience during the 87th National Day of Saudi Arabia last September, was another indicator of this. Um Abdulrahm al-Shihri, who traveled 1,100 kilometers from the city of Tabuk to watch the celebrations, said to Reuters: "You cannot imagine how happy we are today... Women are at all levels now. Women are now representatives in the Shura Council, women are now doctors. So why shouldn't we join the men in things that matter to our nation?"

One of the audience members watching the celebrations, which included fireworks, light shows, and concerts, 25-year-old Sultana, said, "It is the first time I have come to the stadium and I feel like more of a Saudi citizen. I hope that tomorrow women will be permitted bigger and better things. Like driving and [travel](#)." It did not take long for Sultana's wish to come true. A few days later, there was another remarkable development, a genuine first in Saudi Arabia.

King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud issued an executive order that women will also be allowed to obtain a driver's license and drive; he stated that the relevant laws will come into force by June 2018.

The executive order also mentioned the fact that women being able to drive will be quite advantageous. This decision widely resonated within Western society.

Although a woman's right to drive seems to be a rather natural development, which should have happened a long time ago by global standards, it is actually a major step for women considering the conditions in Saudi Arabia. Despite decades of such conservative suppression of women, Saudi Arabia has recently been experiencing a new historical development almost every day.

Aside from what has recently been seen in Saudi Arabia, recent policy actions in other Islamic countries on improving women's rights and freedoms are also extremely pleasing.

For example, last August, Lebanese legislators abolished the law (Article 522) that allowed the offenders who committed rape, assault, and abduction of girls, to avoid judicial punishment if they agreed to marry the victims.

“This is a very positive and long overdue development for the protection of women’s rights in Lebanon”, says Lebanese researcher Bassam Khawaja at Human Rights Watch. However, he also emphasized that there is still much progress to be made: “At the same time in Lebanon there are several long overdue women’s rights developments that we still have to tackle. So Parliament should... immediately pass legislation to end marital rape and also child marriage, which is still legal in [Lebanon](#).”

Another Islamic country making positive progress in terms of women's rights in Iran. Iran recently issued statements for easing the punishments for violating the country's conservative dress code, which has been in place since the 1979 Revolution. Regarding Iran's mandatory hijab rule, Iranian women had started making regular protests, known as White Wednesdays, beginning in May 2017.

Likewise, similar laws were abolished in Jordan and Tunisia earlier this year. Human rights activists believe that these developments in Lebanon will have a positive influence in other Arabian and Islamic countries; articles that provide legal loopholes similar to Article 522 are still in effect in countries such as Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, and [Syria](#).

There is no doubt that the decisive actions gaining increasing momentum in Saudi Arabia will serve as a very important example for the Islamic and Arab world. It is great to see that the fundamental rights of women, which they should have enjoyed from the moment they were born, are finally being returned to them. But of course, this is not enough; in addition to this, it is our greatest desire to see women getting the respect, compassion, love and the rights they deserve in a family, social and business environments alike, which is also a must for creating happy and healthy societies.

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