

Women in the Gulf

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Mapping the Slow Journey for Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia

By Cinzia Bianco

In 2009, Dr Nora Alyousif, accepted her appointment as one of Saudi Arabia's first female government officials by noting that

'Seventy years ago we were completely isolated from the world. The changes which are taking place are unmistakable, and we have finally started opening up.'

Today, Saudi Arabia - the only country in the world where women are not permitted to drive - continues to lag behind in developing women rights. However, the country is committed to delivering a strong push towards advancing women's roles (in all sectors) as part of the encompassing political-economic plan titled *Vision 2030*.

Vision 2030 highlights a number of elements to enhance women's involvement in the economic and social life of the Kingdom. But they did not emerge from nowhere. Instead, the process of inclusion and getting Saudi Arabia's gender-equality programme into shape began with the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women which entered into Saudi law (and into force) 07 September 2000. This was followed by a major push by King Abdallah bin Abdulaziz al Saud (2005-2015) who, after ascending to the throne, declared his intentions to modernise and internationalise the country's educational system. In keeping with this initiative, in 2005, King Abdallah championed a small - but important - socio-cultural revolution with the commencement of the King Abdallah Scholarship Programme that facilitated tens of thousands of young men and women to study abroad.

In 2009, King Abdallah inaugurated the first mixed-gender University in the Kingdom, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). A high-tech campus of global standards, focusing on technological and scientific education, the University was conceived with the aim of spurring the creation of a more liberal mentality within its community, almost in preparation for the further reforms planned. The impact of this promotion of education has been impressive, especially on women: statistics issued by the Ministry of Education in 2016 revealed that Saudi women constitute some 51.8% of Saudi university students (from bachelor to doctoral programmes and in fields ranging from sciences to arts) and that approximately 35000 Saudi women are studying



abroad are dispersed across 57 countries. In the same year, approximately 10% of Saudi women in Universities were working as faculty members in universities. However, spaces were soon to open up for women well beyond the education sector.

During the same period, several job categories - where, previously, men were favoured - opened to women. Consider that, in 2009, an expert on girls' education became Saudi Arabia's very first woman minister as part of a wide-ranging cabinet reshuffle by King Abdullah that swept aside several bastions of ultra-conservatism. Nora bint Abdullah al-Fayez, a US-educated former teacher, was made Deputy Minister of Education and charged with directing a new department for female students. Furthermore, women were granted access to jobs in the public sector, especially administrative and bureaucratic offices such as: passport administration, civil defence, the national human rights commission and the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Soon after, women were also made eligible to run for election in the Chamber of Commerce and the engineers' and journalists' unions.

In 2013 Saudi Arabia registered its first female trainee lawyer, Arwa al-Hujaili, and in 2014 the first lawyer license was granted by the Ministry of Justice to a woman, Bayan Alzahrani, who also opened her own law firm, and the first female Saudi police officer, Ayat Bakhreeba, was appointed. Alongside the traditionally male-dominated domain of the security forces, under King Abdallah also the taboo on female athletes was lifted—in 2013 the Saudi government sanctioned sports for girls in private schools for the first time and in 2016 four Saudi women were allowed to participate in the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. A very symbolic participation indeed.

However, the most impressive and long-lasting reforms were those related to politics. On 25 September 2012 the King Abdullah, issued a decree that allowed Saudi women to enter the Consultative Council (Majlis Ashura) and be nominated for candidacy in municipal elections. Before his death, King Abdullah had appointed 30 women to be a part of the nation's 150-members Majlis Ashura. The King's decree also stipulated that women should make up 20% of the council, and that they would be able to join any of the committees of the council including economic, family and foreign affairs.

Work on the political level is being continued by King Salman bin Abdulaziz. In August 2015 it was announced that, for the first time, women would be allowed to vote and run in municipal elections. A total of 978 women subsequently registered as candidates, alongside 5938 men. Impressively, 18 women, from vastly different parts of the country - ranging from the largest cities to tiny villages - won seats. Still, female candidates had to speak behind a partition while campaigning or be represented by a man. And still, only about 130000 women registered to vote, a figure that falls well short of male voter registration, which stands at some 1.35 million. Such data is indicative of the fact that there is still much to be done.

The debate about what to do and how to do it is as dynamic as ever inside the Kingdom. Local and international women's groups are pushing the government for reform and taking advantage of the fact that **some rulers are eager to project a more progressive image to the West.** The presence of powerful businesswomen—still too few—in some of these groups helps increase the standing of their advocacy for economic equality, civil rights and societal liberation. Issue of male guardianship, the law requiring women to have permission of a male guardian to travel, marry and possibly to be granted employment or access to healthcare, is increasingly being challenged. In 2016, activist Aziza Al-Yousef, a leading women's rights advocate, delivered a petition to end the guardianship system



in person to the Royal Court. However, while government officials and members of the Royal Court have expressed flexible views on further reforming women rights in the Kingdom, even on issues such as driving or the guardianship, most argue that opposition to these reforms is entrenched in the Saudi society, where it is galvanised by conservative clerics.

For example, during the reformist period of the 2010s, on enlarging the participation of women into politics and the labour market, the Grand Mufti, Abdul-Azeez ibn Abdullaah Aal ash-Shaikh famously commented 'Allowing women to mix with men is the root of every evil and catastrophe ... It is highly punishable. Mixing of men and women is a reason for greater decadence and adultery.' The ghost of decadence, equated to Westernisation, is as real as ever within Saudi society. Many Saudis view their country as the closest thing to an ideal and pure Islamic nation, and therefore most in need of resistance to Western morbidity towards vices. Most advocate change that is gradual and consistent with Islam and believe slow change is the only kind possible. Strong female voices, including those advocating for change from their professional positions, argue that they acknowledge how potentially traumatic change can be, in a society that for decades has played by its own rules. Still, few are willing to stop in their slow but steady journey towards more reforms. While Saudi Arabia remains in need of drastic reforms, it should also be recognised and encouraged for the steps it is taking...at its own pace.