

**Aspects and Changes in the Dominant Religious Ideological Structure of Saudi Arabia  
with Focus on Women Nationals**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the change in the status of women in Saudi Arabia in the present times. I have attempted a study in this subject on the basis of two parameters i.e. Ideology and Structure. Any society is made up of these two systems. Ideology controls the mind and is generally created by religion, education, media etc. Structure controls and distributes the resources and is created by political and economic systems. Saudi Arabia, which is an Islamic, patriarchal state, is a society where Ideology largely influences and shapes the Structure. This paper first discusses the politics and culture of Arabian society and then analyses if and how the change in the above two systems has affected the position of women in Arabia in recent times.*

**Keywords:** Ideology, Saudi Arabia, Saudi Women, Cultural Studies, Patriarchy.

Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* defines Ideology as “a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group; a system of illusory beliefs- false ideas or false consciousness which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge; or the general process of the production of meanings and ideas”. No group, family or nation can function without following a particular set of principles or ideas. Marx’s economic base and superstructure model of society explains the two important slabs on which the society is founded and flourished upon. According to him, *base* denotes the relations of production (economic modes), whereas *superstructure* denotes the dominant ideology, which can be political, religious, or legal systems. The economic base of production establishes the political, religious or legal superstructure of a society. Further, because the modes of production are controlled by the ruling class of society, it’s them who decide on the superstructure and the nature of justifying ideology for the rest of the population. For

example, in a feudal mode of production, like in Saudi Arabia, religious ideology is the most outstanding aspect of the superstructure, while in capitalist societies, most of the western world; ideologies such as liberalism and social democracy dominate. Hence, ideology holds a great significance in justifying a society and its superstructure. In the attempt to control the 'other' or marginalized sections of the population, the ruling class alienates and confuses them through false consciousness. Using religion or history, the working class and marginalized sections are tricked into believing that the ruling class's false ideology is in their best interests. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony best explains the above phenomenon.

The present research paper shall attempt to study the various facets of Religious Ideology popular in predominantly Muslim nations, in particular, Saudi Arabia. In addition to that, the paper will bring to light the institutions, such as legislature, judicial or even cultural, which help in reinforcing the ruling class's ideology and repressing the voices of change. Finally, the paper will conclude with an assessment of change that has been brought about by various dissenting voices. Saudi Arabia being a patriarchal society, the Ideology dominant is that of men, who use religion, education, media or even violence (domestic violence, eve-teasing, rape, molestation etc) to subjugate women according to their interests. The structures of the society like politics, judiciary, and economics are in the hands of men, who, using the ideological power over women take away even their reproductive and sexual powers along with the means of production and other resources.

Although Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, the King must rule in accordance with the Basic Law. The Basic Law of Saudi Arabia decrees that the king must comply with *Sharia* (Islamic law), the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* (the traditions of Muhammad), even though there is no written constitution in accordance with modern times. The *Ulema*, which is an official group of Islamic religious leaders and jurists, is another distinctive feature of Saudi Arabia. The *Ulema*, not only has a direct role in the governance of the country, but also holds the major share of authority in the arena of religion and social mores and codes of conduct.

Hence, various structures of Saudi Arabian society are dominated by its religious ideology. Even institutions such as the Judiciary and Legislature, which logically would suggest secular nature, derive its laws from their religious books and are carried out by the *Ulema*, a religious force comprising of leaders and judges. No system of codification or precedent exists, hence, the rulings are arbitrary and many times, contradictory to the previous ones in similar cases. Saudi judges are known to follow the principals of Hanibali school of jurisprudence (or *fiqh*) found in pre-modern texts and use the literal translation of its religious texts.

The educational institutions are similarly dominated by the religious superstructure. Study of Islam, rote-learning of the religious texts like *Quran*, its interpretation and application to daily life is the mainstay of education structure.

The effect of such religious ideology and the control it has on the institutions of the society is vehemently felt amidst the social fabric of Saudi Arabia, especially among the powerless working class and more among the doubly marginalized female population. The *Ulema* and the protectors of social codes and conduct strictly enforce many checks on the behaviour and dress of people. Saudi Arabian follows the rules of *hijab*, the Islamic principle of modesty, especially in dress. Suited to its desert climate, the loose and flowing garment is worn by both the genders; women, along with the *abaya*, can choose to cover their faces with *niqab*. Drinking of alcohol is strictly prohibited, ban on theatre or public exhibition of films was removed only in 2017, practice of non-Muslim faiths is not allowed, and expression of opinion on political or social matters is discouraged or even banned in certain public spaces such as the internet; furthermore, formation of unions or political parties is strictly prohibited.

Arabian laws reach their narrowest limits when concerned with women. The United States State Department contends that “discrimination against women is a significant problem” in Saudi Arabia. Women in Saudi Arabia have few political rights and little social and economic freedom. Violence against women, both inside and outside homes is a major problem as there is no law which criminalizes violence against women. In fact, a woman caught in an unfortunate situation is questioned and punished with violence for transgressing the social rules of conduct.

There are a number of rules and restrictions imposed on women in the name of Islam and honour. According to the Sharia, every adult woman has to have a close male relative as her “guardian”. Hence, the position of women is like that of a child, with no autonomy over themselves. The responsibilities of a guardian include escorting her if she needs to go out of their homes, approving the sanction of licences for business and allowing the women to travel or stay at a hotel. Even when a guardian’s consent is not legally necessary, many officials will still ask for it.

Saudi Arabian women are, expectedly, treated as the second sex in the courts as well. The law that the testimony of one man equals to that of two women is a mathematical and clear example of the discrimination women face at a place where justice is dispensed. Polygamy is allowed to men, and men can independently divorce (*talaq*) their wives without requiring any legal justification, whereas women can only attain a divorce if the husband consents, or judicially if it is proven that the husband has harmed her. Practically, it is impossible for a woman in Saudi Arabia to get a divorce.

The daily life of Saudi women is rife with restrictions based on cultural norms, effectively inflicted by the *mutawa*, the religious police. Women are required to cover themselves up in public places and should not reveal their hair, any form of beautification or ornamentation in public is punishable offence, also, there are separate family sections in the restaurants for the women to sit, not allowing women to mix with the members of the opposite gender who are not her family. There have been a number of incidents where the women transgressed such discriminatory and whacky norms and corresponding punishment was meted out to her by the *mutawa*. One such incident, which made international news, was when a woman was told to leave the mall because her nails were painted. According to their religious norms, a woman can apply nail paint only if she is menstruating or within the confines of her home.

Gender mixing is strictly banned but with increasing number of women demanding the right to work outside their homes, it becomes impossible to keep men from coming in contact with women. To solve this conundrum, a *fatwa* or Islamic legal decree was issued by Dr. Izzat Atiya, head of Al Azhar University's Department of Hadith, in May 2007. According to the *fatwa*, female workers should "breastfeed" their male co-workers in order to work in each other's company. He said that if a woman fed a male colleague "directly from her breast" at least five times they would ascertain a family bond and hence be allowed to be alone together at work. "Breast feeding an adult puts an end to the problem of the private meeting, and does not ban marriage," he ruled. "A woman at work can take off the veil or reveal her hair in front of someone whom she breastfed."

Atiya based his fatwa on a hadith—a documented saying or doing of Islam's prophet Muhammad and subsequently one of Sharia law's sources of jurisprudence. However, because it was never truly rebutted, it kept making comebacks. Three years later in 2010, a high-ranking Saudi, Sheikh Abdul Mohsin al-Abaican issued a fatwa confirming that "women could give their milk to men to establish a degree of maternal relations and get around a strict religious ban on mixing between unrelated men and women." But unlike Atiya's fatwa, "the man should take the milk, but not directly from the breast of the woman. He should drink it [from a cup] and then [he] becomes a relative of the family, a fact that allows him to come in contact with the women without breaking Islam's rules about mixing." Their fear of gender mixing leading to sexual promiscuities along with the belief in the Hadiths is so great that they will follow such an embarrassing, absurd and ludicrous law ignoring all the logical and obvious effects of such a practice.

Another restriction imposed on women for the fear of gender mixing was ban on women driving. Women were not allowed to drive on their own hence they were rendered to their homes or dependent upon their husbands or relatives to take them out. The protectors of Islam propagated this false belief and incorporated it in their patriarchal ideology damning

the act of driving by women as un-Islamic. The obvious motive was to take away the power from women to leave a place or run away if need be. It leads to helplessness and takes away her right to save herself in case of any emergency or domestic violence. In recent years, especially since King Abdullah came to the throne in 2005, various campaigns and movements were carried out and they have tasted success slowly but steadily, eventually leading to the uplifting of the ban in September 2017.

The issue of ban on driving by women is a case in point, exemplifying how religious ideology manifests itself into the societal and legal structure. Ban on driving was not always there. It was simply a cultural norm, until 1990, when forty-seven women took cars out on the roads to challenge the authorities. The Saudi religious authorities reacted with jailing the women for one day and taking away their passports. Many lost their jobs. Manal al-Sharif, a women's activist, was jailed after she posted a video of herself driving in the Saudi city of Khobar on YouTube which sparked the My Right to Dignity campaign. After that there have been numerous such driving campaigns, some with success and some led to punishments of lashings or jail sentences.

Aziza al-Yousef is a visible element of change due to these campaigns. She was a 52-year-old computer science university lecturer when she took a 15- minute drive in the Saudi capital to mark the first anniversary of the campaign to end the ban on women drivers in the kingdom. Al-Yousef said she encountered no problems driving in support of a call by the My Right to Dignity campaign. Al-Yousef and about 100 other women across the kingdom haven't stopped driving since the campaign was started and finally in the year 2017, they got the legal rights to drive.

The conservatives argued if women are allowed to drive, they will be able to mix freely with men. Saudi clerics had warned that if women are allowed to drive, it would spell the end of virginity in the country. A report was prepared for Saudi Arabia's legislative assembly, the Shura Council, by a well-known conservative academic. The report contains graphic warnings that letting women drive would increase prostitution, pornography, homosexuality and divorce. It is clear that by giving religious leanings to a social issue, women were being denied of a very basic and practical right.

On the educational front, women are lagging behind due to the practice of child marriage, where men marry girls as young as ten. The drop-out rate of girls increases around puberty, as they exchange education for marriage. Roughly 25% of college-aged young women do not attend college, and in 2005–2006, women had a 60% dropout rate. Female literacy is estimated to be around 70% compared to male literacy of around 85%.

Restriction on females to take part in any physical and sports activity even in school is another clear example of patriarchal ideology, which only wants to see and present women as

meek and fragile beings. Saudi Arabian women are not permitted to take part in PE at school in their home country, or join a sports club, or even attend a sporting event as a spectator. According to the religious clerics, opening the gates of sports to women will open the gates to lesbianism as women will be attracted to each other's bodies while in changing rooms.

However, giving away to the pressure imposed by IOC, Saudi Government agreed to send two women participants to the Olympics 2012. Wojdan Shaherkani and Sarah Attar were the two women who represented Saudi Arabia in the Olympics. Even though they lost, their participation was a huge victory for the feminists as it will contribute to turn over sexist attitudes in Saudi Arabia that prevent women from, among many other things, exercising in school and competing in organized sports. Though many feminists consider it as a groundbreaking precedence, contributing to breaking stereotypes, many do not think this will change anything. They worry it is a cynical public-relations salve that won't change hearts, minds or gym regulations. Aziza al-Yousef, a computer science professor who is a leader in the Saudi women's right-to-drive movement, said that, "This is not a step forward for women's rights...We've been asking for girls to play sports in school for years; here they give Saudi women a spot in the Olympics, but not the right to earn a place on the team. This doesn't add anything, and it won't change anything."

On Twitter, uncensored in Saudi, some expressed pride, others prejudice. "Wojdan, you don't represent my mother, sister, wife, or virtuous Muslim and Saudi Women," one man wrote. "May god never forgive whoever allowed you to tarnish the reputation of the people you lived amongst." A woman praised her dedication to faith over sport: "History will not write her down as the first female Saudi athlete in the Olympics, but as the first woman to impose *hijab* in judo."

For the desert kingdom, the decision to allow women to compete in the Olympics is a huge step, overturning deep-rooted opposition from those opposed to any public role for women. It might be a singular event, but it has broken the long tradition and many will come forward to encourage women participation in sports on a public platform.

Women are just not oppressed by teaching the dictates of Islam and Prophet Mohammad, violence is an integral part of reining women. Domestic violence, rapes, beatings etc. is considered the right of the husband or males. Humanitarian values do not stand for females. Islam, the teachings of Prophet and honour of men comes foremost. The most gruesome example of such a mentality is the incident when Saudi Arabia's religious police stopped schoolgirls from leaving a burning building because they were not wearing *hijab*. According to the al-Eqtisadiyah daily, firemen confronted police after they tried to keep the girls inside because they were not wearing the headscarves and *abayas* (black robes) required by the kingdom's strict interpretation of Islam. One witness said he saw three policemen "beating

young girls to prevent them from leaving the school because they were not wearing the abaya". The Saudi Gazette quoted witnesses as saying that the police - known as the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice - had stopped men who tried to help the girls and warned "it is a sin to approach them". The father of one of the dead girls said that the school watchman even refused to open the gates to let the girls out. Fifteen girls lost their lives to "safeguard" the honour of Islam.

In another incident, a 19 year old woman was gang-raped fourteen times in an attack in Qatif. Court arrested seven men, who were sentenced to prison terms ranging from just under a year to five years. The woman was sentenced to 90 lashes for being in the car of a strange man. When she appealed, judges doubled her sentence to 200 lashes and a six-month prison sentence, saying she had been trying to use the media to influence them. The prison sentences for the rapists were doubled when they deserved death penalty.

Such cases show the value women have in the society and how violence, religion and law suppress them under their dominance. The UN report says social attitudes and the system of male guardianship deter women from reporting crimes and lead to a patriarchal system.

Saudi society further keeps its ideology alive by suppressing the counter-ideology or views expressed by some people through censoring, issuing *fatwas*, stringent laws, punishments etc. Some Saudi novelists have had their books published in Aden, Yemen, because of censorship in Saudi Arabia. Despite signs of increasing openness, Saudi novelists and artists in film, theatre, and the visual arts face greater restrictions on their freedom of expression than in the West. Turki al-Hamad is one such Saudi writer who is a subject of a *fatwā* and death threats.

Young Saudi men and women who can't share their views on conventional public platforms such as newspapers, magazines and television as media is very much controlled, are using internet to voice their opinions. There is a blogging boom in Saudi Arabia. There are now between 500 and 600 Saudi blogs both in English as well as Arabic. Fouad al-Farhan, who runs an IT company in Jeddah, uses web logging to remark on political and religious issues. The blog has been blocked. An anonymous woman blogs under the name Mystique. Her English blog is considered 'outspoken' by Saudi standards. She writes a fictional series about a love story between a woman and a man and frequently gets hate mail. An extract from her blog of a poem "*Rantings of an Arabian woman*" is reproduced here:

I am born - a man chooses my name,  
I am taught - to appreciate that he did not bury me alive,  
I learn - what he wants me to know,  
I marry - who he wants me to marry,

I eat - what he wants me to eat,  
If he dies - another man controls my life  
A father, a brother, a husband, a son, a man.

Other bloggers, such as Saudi Eve, Ahmed al-Omran and many others had their blogs blocked as the content was found objectionable.

Television is another area where the religious leaders enforce rigid control. In 2008, a prominent Saudi cleric declared that it was acceptable to kill the owners of satellite TV stations that broadcast “immoral” material. A Saudi cleric said (in all seriousness) that children should not be allowed to watch Mickey Mouse, labelling the cartoon character a “soldier of Satan” who should be killed.

Later, a Saudi cleric condemned the Arab world’s most popular television show, the Turkish series “Noor”, describing it to be “replete with evil, wickedness, moral collapse and a war on the virtues.” He also barred Muslims from watching the series as it depicted events ranging from premarital sex, drinking wine with dinner, abortion, and an equal marriage between Muslim couple, where the husband supports wife’s career of fashion designing.

It is clear from above instances how patriarchy enforces its ideology and also lead people to believe that it is a true way of life and those who question it are silenced through violence and other means.

In spite of the above tactics used by the *Ulema* and others, there is a change in the condition of women. Many new laws are being passed, some are being revised and many job opportunities are being created for women. Other than many feminists asking for the rights and freedom of women, King Abdullah is seen as a reformer and champion of women’s rights. He announced that women are theoretically to be given the same opportunities for political participation as men. He said that Muslim women had given "opinions and advice since the era of Prophet Muhammad". The king remarked, "Because we refuse to marginalise women in society in all roles that comply with *sharia*, we have decided, after deliberation with our senior clerics... to involve women in the Shura Council as members."

Many more such laws have been passed that are pro-women. For instance, the Ministry of Justice will permit women lawyers to practice the legal profession without any differentiation between the female and male practioners of law. A woman can now stay in a hotel if she carries identification. This represents a break from religious codes requiring women to be accompanied by a male guardian at all times. Saudi Arabian women shall be able to travel to Gulf countries without requiring a passport. This privilege was earlier limited to Saudi men. The Ministry of Justice has annulled a court order making it mandatory on wives to return to their husbands. Under new Article 75, “The verdict asking the wife to return to the married

home should not be implemented by force, but according to Article 74, law may be brought into use to execute court rulings concerning custody of children or separating husband and wife”.

Other than these legal decrees, efforts are being made to include more women into job and business market. For instance, the Kafala Program approved 188 guarantees for Saudi young businesswomen. By guaranteeing the businesswomen, the Program will help them initiate their small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Also, the Saudi Industrial Property Authority (MODON) postulated generating ten thousand jobs by building an industrial city. Half of these jobs are targeted at women, with transport facilities.

These are the changes, structural in nature, that are coming due to any number of reasons, but the real question is, will it help in the improvement in the status of women? Laws have been passed, but will they be implemented? The proposal to generate jobs for women has been provided, but how many would be allowed to? These are the first steps that are definitely helpful as they will lead to more and greater changes but will these change the ideology of the people that women are inferior beings who needs “guardianship” over every little aspect of life?

The formation of the industrial towns that will generate jobs for around five thousand women and where they will work in “light and clean parts of manufacturing in an appropriate environment”, raises the question that till now were there no “light and clean parts of manufacturing in an appropriate environment”? Proposals may be passed but until women do not receive permission to work from her “guardian”, any number of laws is futile.

Hence, the issue of guardianship and also the ban on gender mixing, the results of the religious superstructure governing the nation, are the main problem hampering the efforts at women emancipation. They may be given jobs, laws may be made to protect her from violence but at the end the perpetrator of the crime is her guardian or if she can’t reach the workplace or even if she does, how many separate offices and compartments would the government build to ensure gender segregation. There will be ultra-conservatives who will try to curb her freedom. For instance, two lawyers, Mohammed Al Zamil and Mohammed Al Sultan won a case at the Board of Grievances, a government agency administrative court, on the recent decision to allow women to work in lingerie shops. These are conservatives who are of the belief that women should completely be removed from the public sphere and strict rules of gender segregation be put into practice. There are women who sell wares on the dusty footpath, maids who come in contact with males, then why is objection raised when women are getting jobs on a little better scale? This kind of conservative mentality will denigrate all efforts because working women will have to face such people every day.

A laudable attempt done by a senior official at the Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, an institution which seems to believe it has a duty from God to enforce their moral code on society, including segregation of men and women, criticised the way the *Mutaween* work and disapproved the rigid segregation of sexes. But many conservatives were outraged and stood outside his house demanding to mix with his wife and daughters. It shows that the socio-religious beliefs cannot be transformed easily, even if the sanction comes from the highest authority itself. On one side the debates caused by his comments is a good thing but on another, if ever sex segregation is abolished there would be an increase in violence and rapes as a reaction from the ultra-conservatives.

Change in ideology is difficult to happen so soon, but the structural changes are the first step. In Western societies, aspects of liberal feminism had gained traction, particularly an emphasis on increasing opportunities for women's access to education and work. Middle Eastern societies are also on the same path. There is a cry to generate more opportunities, more rights and freedom for women. The change is happening and in a positive direction but if laws are not strong enough to protect women then all the initiatives will annihilate themselves.

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