

# Is There Feminism in Saudi Arabia?

Jacquelyn Hoza,<sup>1</sup> Dr. Sarra Tlili<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Center for Gender, Sexualities, and Women's Studies Research; <sup>2</sup>Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL

## Introduction

The use of the word feminism might be problematic in trying to describe women's movement in Saudi Arabia because of historical and social factors associated with the feminist movement. Feminism is a movement that developed out of Western context and discourse, therefore it might not properly describe what is taking place in Saudi Arabia. A comparison between women's movements in Saudi Arabia and the Western feminist movement reveals important differences. This, however, does not mean that Saudis are not preoccupied by the theme of justice as it pertains to gender issues. This research will discuss why feminist theory may not be the ideal, and certainly not the only system that can address oppressive systems in non-Western societies, including Saudi Arabia. Additionally, this research will describe and analyze the ways in which Saudi women are working towards defining their own views of equity and creating women's movement within their society.

## Approach

The aim of this research is to challenge the view that Saudi women have no agency and to explore the ways they seek to shape their society and challenge oppressive systems from within their own culture and worldview. To this end, I will start by arguing that feminist theory may not be the ideal, and certainly not the only system that can address oppressive systems in non-Western societies, including Saudi Arabia. Second, I will describe and analyze the ways in which Saudi women are working towards defining their own views of equity and creating women's movement within their society.

## Feminism

- The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines feminism as "the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes."
- The roots of feminism can be traced back to the mid-eighteenth century, specifically the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.
- The Enlightenment and the French Revolution created a formal space where women could question and challenge their status and roles. They thus applied new theories on justice and equality to their own conditions.
- Feminism reacts to patriarchy only on the level of gender, but fails to react to it when other factors of privilege are involved, which further compounds how women are mistreated in different societies.
- Many women took notice of the limits of feminism and sought to create new spaces outside of traditional feminism to combat these issues. One strategy consists of the creation and naming of new types of feminism, such as intersectional feminism, postcolonial feminism, Islamic feminism and womanism.

## Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabian Women

- Saudi Arabia abides by Islamic Law, Sharia, supplemented by secular codes that have been added over the years. Saudi Arabia observes sex segregation and enforces this rule through the body of religious police known as *mutawwa*. This has resulted in separate areas for families, women and single men in both the public and private spheres.
- Women must wear the *abaya*, *hijab* and *niqab* if they are in the public, but some women only spaces do allow them to remove these garments.
- The Western public, specifically in America, knew little about Saudi Arabia prior to the Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990 to gain control of their oil industry.
- During the Gulf War, the experiences of military women were heavily documented in Western media. Many American service women reported their conflicts with Saudi police, which they believed exemplified Saudi patriarchy.
- In Western media, Saudi women consistently come across as lacking agency and in need of the help of Western feminists to achieve equality.



Figure 1 (Left): Saudi Activist, Manal Al Sharif, protesting the Saudi Arabian ban on women driving in October 2013. The ban was lifted in December 2017.

Source: <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/27/middleeast/saudi-women-still-cant-do-this/index.html>

Figure 2 (Right): Saudi women in a shopping mall. The burqa is shown on the woman on the right.

Source: Amelie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia*



Figure 3 (Left): The Riyadh Employment Fair on a women only day.

Source: Amelie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia*

## Progress Towards Equity

- **Online Advocacy:** Saudi women engage with others online through Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, which allow them to negotiate their identities and empower themselves by destabilizing the assumptions that they are, as Guta says, "victims of longstanding patriarchal oppressive practices."
- **Work and Entrepreneurship:** Saudi women are finding empowerment through traditional markers of empowerment, such as finding jobs and creating their own business. Women in the workforce within Saudi Arabia is on the rise, going from 5.4% in 1992 to 14.4% as of 2007.
- **Group activism:** Group activism may be divided into four categories, namely, liberal, rights-based, Islamist feminist and conservative. Each group has various organizational structures. Some are highly regulated through meetings and membership fees while others are formed around events or social media. These groups typically avoid the label of feminism.
- **Everyday Transgression:** Saudi women break rules through transgressive acts, such as decorating their veils. They are creating new spaces of action for women through unofficial channels, which further shows the agency of women acting within Saudi's societal constraints. Although these may appear as mere individual approaches, they do have a collective nature to them.

## Conclusions

- Since Saudi Arabia bans many movements and protests, many women's movements are often individual acts of transgression, empowerment or other types of individual agency that becomes interconnected in society, often without the strict purpose to do so. While these movements do not always result in legal changes, they do result in social changes, therefore gradually transforming the status and roles of women.
- This type of activism does not reject Saudi society, culture or laws, but rather embraces them in new ways.
- Saudi women's movements might not resemble anything close to the mainstream Western feminist movement due to the laws and regulations of Saudi Arabia, nevertheless, Saudi women have made progress and are changing society to fit their views of justice and equitability.

## Selected References

Guta, Hala, Magdalena Karolak. "Veiling and Blogging: Social Media as Sites of Identity Negotiation and Expression among Saudi Women," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 16, no. 2 (2015): 115-127.

Hannam, June. *Feminism*. London: Routledge, 2014. PDF. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/lp.hscl.ufl.edu/books/9781317861089>

Renard, Amelie. *A Society of Young Women*: Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. Kindle. <https://www.amazon.com/Society-Young-Women-Opportunities-Reform-ebook/dp/B00KTZQ4K6>