

Education and the Role of Women in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

In this paper my aim is to understand the epistemology of Saudi women using “Women’s Ways of Knowing” by Belenky et al. I will delve into the women’s educational system in Saudi Arabia and how that may contribute and shape the work field and society as a whole. Females in Saudi are sex- segregated from an early age. In such an environment I can not help but wonder why there is not a sense of empowerment. And I question if the educational system and job opportunities provided for women are used to place these women in the ideal feminine roles defined by society due to culture, traditions and religious interpretations.

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Introduction

In 2003 fifteen girls lost their lives and many more were injured after the religious police prevented both the girls from escaping the burning college building and the firemen from entering it. This was due to the fact that the girls were not wearing the proper attire enforced by the Religious police and the Saudi government. After hearing this news I was deeply sadden not only because of how ridicules it is but also because I knew some of the girls. This story highlights the women's role of silence and received knowledge in Saudi. It is the reason behind the inquiry of 'what are Saudi women's ways of knowing?' Are we as Saudi Females that silent and that obedient that we sit in a burning building because we were told so? In this paper I will try to answer theses questions by examine the girls' educational system and how that may play a role in the positions women take as adults.

Although females have been able to quickly catch up with their male counterparts in education, and more females than males graduate college each year, ninety five percent of women in Saudi of working age are housewives (Kinninmont, 2006) and only around 7% are employed (tarbush, 2000). The concept of choosing higher education and a career over family life and children is virtually unknown. The main reason many women get educated is because there is a wide held belief that education increases the marriageability of a girl; but, in the same breath, too much might have the opposite effect.

Many times it is found that the male guardian (whether father, brother, uncle or husband) of the educated female is given gratitude for allowing them to get an education.

This is true for me, I was raised by a father who treasures education and married to an ambitious husband. Different circumstances may have put me in different situations. Actually, education in Saudi is not yet a legal right for women. In fact, there are many rural areas in Saudi where nothing has changed for women for the past thirty years.

Education in Saudi

Education is provided for free by the government to all Saudis and children of Arabic-speaking residents, but it is not compulsory. The goal of the Saudi educational system is to provide religious, moral and intellectual training with the purpose of creating citizens who are knowledgeable in their rights and their obligations towards society. All of which can be clearly and easily seen in the curriculum of both girls and boys schools.

To give a brief history, girls' public education in Saudi is less than fifty years old. There were no forms of public education for women in Saudi before 1960; however, there were a few private institutes for the daughters of the privileged. The first private school for middle class girls was established in 1941 by immigrants from Indonesia and Malawi who came to Saudi for pilgrimage and decided to stay. Soon private girls' schools founded by Saudis began to appear in Mecca, Jeddah and Riyadh in the late forties to mid-fifties. This shows that all that was needed was an incentive to set the policy in motion. King *Sa'ud* addressed the nation on the subject of girl's education in 1959:

Thanks be to god, we have decided to bring into effect the desire of the *Ulama*ⁱ in Saudi Arabia, and to open schools to teach our girls the science of our religion from the *Quran*ⁱⁱ, and belief and *fuqaha*ⁱⁱⁱ, and other sciences which are in harmony with our religious beliefs, such as home economics and child rearing,

and anything of which the effect on their belief will not make us fear for the present or for the future. The schools will not have any negative effect on our belief or behavior or customs. To this end, we order that a committee be set up, its members being drawn from the important *Ulama*, who we trust very much to organize this school, to decide on a program, and to see that it is carried out.

(Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991, p.288)

Even though the goals for girls' education were conservative, as can be seen from the statement above, it was greeted with little enthusiasm by conservative parents who refused to send their daughters to school because of the fear that they might lose interest in the traditional home-based roles of women. Those who were more conservative saw the education of girls as an undermining factor to the very foundations of morality and family life. It must be noted that these conservative attitudes towards girls' education did not arise out of the influence of Islam but out of the traditions that formed around it (Al-Rawaf & Simmons, 1991).

Schools were set up to teach girls nothing more than running a household and accomplishing tasks such as sewing and cooking. However, it must be pointed out that the basic education in literacy and numeracy for girls in Saudi was a big step forward. There was a fear that this development could mean the vanishing of the traditional place of women and that girls' education was Western inspired. Looking into the girls' elementary curriculum and text books, this fear can clearly be noted as the Ministry of Education worked hard to ensure that the traditional values were sustained and that the freedoms enjoyed by western women were not admirable. For example, in the first grade reader a statement such as "my father goes to work; my mother stays at home and cooks

and cares for the family” (GEGP, 1978) is clearly present on many pages. This is to bolster the traditional roles of men and women. Similarly in the fourth grade reader, a girl describes everyday life, “in my leisure time I do needlework; this is my sport. If I finish my needlework I go to serve my family. After this I go to the kitchen because in the kitchen I have a noble position” (GPGE, 1981). As a young girl I not only had to read this but I was also supposed to come up with such ideas for composition.

It is found that the highest numbers of females in colleges are in the fields of humanities, social sciences, education and religious studies; whereas in other fields such as engineering, law and architecture the numbers are close to nil. (Ministry of Higher Education, 1998). The above indicates that women in Saudi are enrolling in the fields society considers suitable. That is because society believes that a women’s goal is to find a suitable husband and in the latter fields mentioned above her chances are narrowed. As I try to think of the reasons why this is believed, I am not able to truly say the reasons. I guess I follow tradition more than truly understanding it. This is close to home for me; as my sister was trying to decide on what medical field to specialize in, she concluded, after much advice from every person in the family, that working in the lab would be best for her as she is unmarried and hospital labs were usually segregated. We all supported her on her decision, but now I wonder if we have in any way hindered her potentials.

Nowadays the economic growth and the education of the older generations of females may favor the development of the education of women beyond the traditional roles; however, there are still many restrictions which may hinder its advancement. These restrictions maybe curricular in nature, that is, not all courses available to men are as easily accessible to women; for example, Effat College, a private university, recently

added an engineering course for women. However, this course is only accessible to those who can afford it and they are the elite minority. The restriction maybe economic, that is, less money is spent on equipping women's school libraries and laboratories. It maybe cultural, that is, women must be driven to schools by men but must be taught by women. Finally, it maybe occupational because only a limited number of jobs are provided for women; thus, many are not able to find 'appropriate' work (Al Rawaf & Simmons, 1991).

To conclude this section I came upon an article about the education of girls in Middle Eastern countries. In it the author states that "Social reproduction theorists argue that power relations and domination underlie formal education systems. In this theoretical framework, schools serve to support existing power relations and to socialize young people to play their class and gender roles in these relations... Feminist social reproduction theorists in turn argue that schools serve to preserve patriarchy and dominant gender relations that relegate women to a subordinate role in society" (Adely, 2004, p.354). This cannot be truer than in Saudi where the educational system is used as a tool to 'place' women in the roles it deems appropriate i.e. as a wife and a mother.

Work Field in Saudi

As mentioned earlier, only seven percent of women enter the working field. Many of them are placed in teaching, nursing, medicine or charity work. In fact, 53.8 percent of employed females are involved in scientific, technical and humanitarian works (General Statistics Department, 2006). Although, there maybe restrictions on women's participation in various professions, the educational output is seen as the main problem because it is the reason women's entry into the labor market is so limited.

Female unemployment is seen as a problem and the Saudi government has taken steps to increase job opportunities for Saudi females in new areas and apart from the traditional roles. That is because economic necessity has pushed many women in to the work field, so much so that teaching positions are so over filled that many teachers are being sent to remote parts of the Kingdom, an idea that was and is still to some degree unthinkable.

I came upon an article that showed the 1992 census of population which revealed that thirty three percent of female graduates were unemployed, at the same time females with a lower level of education found work more easily in mundane jobs (Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002). I could not help but question why, and some of the reasons I thought of could be because of the roles prescribed to women by society, where they may not value a woman who is too educated, a woman who might have shunned family life for education. Also, it could be that the education provided for women lacks the specialization required by many jobs and thus they do not get the jobs they apply for.

I also found that the General Civil Service tried to place women in employment; however, it was not successful because many women were reluctant to work far from their current area of residence (Calvert & Al-Shetaiwi, 2002). Another finding showed that the Ministry of Labor launched an employment campaign in 2005 to help employ more than 200,000 women. However, the work offered included receptionists, tailor-shop and wedding-hall employees, nutritionists, governesses, marketers, secretaries, photographers, beauticians, caterers, and hospitality and amusement park employees (Akeel, 2005). So, although it may seem that there is the need and an effort to employ women, the opportunities presented to them are not convenient, these women have to

operate under difficulties: they must adhere to social laws and yet live in the reality of economic needs. Many women wish to enter the work field in full force but are limited by restrictions placed on them by society, it is tradition and culture and not Islam that support these restrictions.

It maybe true that the Saudi Labor laws may limit the places where women work, however at the same time these same limits open up a legitimate workspace for women. For example, because women are not allowed to work in banks, and because Islamic principles justify women's use of banks, new banks for women by women were established, thus providing more job opportunities. Similarly, many labor laws that protect women are very progressive in their benefits. For example, women workers are entitled to a ten-week fully paid maternity leave, and once they return they have daily time off for nursing. Women also receive medical coverage and cannot be fired during pregnancy leave (Doumato, 1992). I find this to be a balance between what society wants, a domesticated female, and the reality and demands of life, i.e. money.

It is inevitable that more and more women will join the work field, whether for economic or other reasons, and they must do so within the segregated structure of the Saudi society. One useful link in this development is modern technology. "Saudi women are already keen users of the internet in Saudi Arabia, and this enhances their opportunities to telecommute from home and to engage in e-business" (Tarbush, 2000, p.44).

Finally as one frustrated women said "is it not enough that she (the Saudi women) has been deprived of education because men were ignorant of the importance of women's education? Is it not enough that they relegate her to the fields of nursing,

teaching, and gynecology even though if given the opportunity she would achieve what men could not achieve for her nation and the entire Muslim world? Why do men believe women to be evil and consider her employment in the public realm shameful? Is it not better for her to work and keep her mind busy with work instead of occupying her with thoughts of her deprivation that will turn her into an enemy of society?" (El-Youssef, 2004).

The Ideal Woman

Due to the sex-segregation in Saudi, there is this image of the 'Ideal' Muslim woman; a woman who stays at home to take care of the children, cook and care for her husband, her place is within the family. When at home she educates the next generation and is the maintainer of tradition. This is the gender ideology promoted in the education and the opportunities for work provided for Saudi females. It is an ideology that first appeared in the fifties when the whole issue of the role of women became apparent with the move towards educating females. In fact this ideology is the cornerstone of the girls' educational policy "the purpose of educating a girl is to bring her up in a proper Islamic ways so as to perform her duty in life, be an ideal and successful housewife and a good mother, prepared to do things which suit her nature, like teaching, nursing and giving medical treatment" (Al-Zaid, 1981, p.56).

Although other Muslim countries practice sex-segregation, the degree that is practiced in Saudi, even outside the home, is completely unknown to most other Muslim countries. Thus, Saudi uses this image of the 'ideal woman' as a national symbol. The reason this degree of segregation exists is because Saudi never experienced colonialism. Another reason is that this belief has been incorporated into public policy "*Shari'a*^{iv} laws

of personal status remain unmodified and are enforced through the courts: men retain prerogatives in marriage, divorce, and child custody, and also in the practice of polygamy...Women are not allowed to travel without the permission of a *Mahram*^v a policy which is enforced by the state at airline check-in counters, railway stations, and hotels, where women traveling alone may not register for a room. Further, women may not receive a commercial license unless a male manager has been hired, and certain courses, such as engineering, are only now opening up in female universities because it was view that an employment in engineering is incompatible with sex-segregation” (Doumato, 1992, p.34).

Ways of Knowing

Even though “Women’s Ways of Knowing” was an eye opener for me I could not help but wonder if the five categories (silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge and constructed knowledge) could be used to discuss Saudi women’s ways of knowing. After searching through articles and contemplating my own life experiences I came to the conclusion that although those categories could be used in some way to describe our situation, it would not encompass all the different aspects of a Saudi woman’s life and her knowing.

We were asked to read Reybold’s (2002) article as part of our curriculum, and I am glad I did because to me it seem to be close to the epistemology of Saudi women. I believe that the similarities I see between the Malaysian women in Reybold’s study and Saudi women, according to my understanding, is due to the strong influence of religion and culture. Although the two cultures are not the same, there is a strong link, I feel, to the ways of knowing described in the article. Tradition and religion is a big part of our

lives, it is what we turn to in our everyday life; therefore it is a major part of our epistemology. At the same time, these traditions are ridged and need to be changed and adapted to be more realistic for today's needs.

I did receive a great deal of criticism form my family and friends when they found out that I was doing a paper on this topic, "don't make it sound so negative, we are happy" many would say to me. I do agree with them to some degree, and I let them know that this is simply our way of knowing that others might not understand without delving into our world. And so, I conclude this section with a quote I underlined several times in Reybold's article, "a cultural understanding supports a non-essentialist perspective of knowing...culture is a directive force in human thought and behavior and...culture mediates the experience of personal epistemology in everyday life" (p.538).

Conclusion

It is obvious that Saudi women have real issues to deal with and many are annoyed by what outsiders might perceive to be problems, such as the veil or driving, and not see the real issues they face, such as finding a good job. "They are not bothered by what others perceive them to be, but they deal with the real worries, issues and ambitions" (WIN News, 2003). It is true that Saudi women may seem silent and obedient but the reality is, they are very aware of their situation and are working hard on changing it. In fact in this country where women can not drive, Hanadi Hindi became the first Saudi woman to obtain a pilots license in 2004.

In my search I found many inspiring, though daring, quotes by Saudi men and women in the English language Saudi newspaper Arab News. I believe the writers were able to get away with the things they said because the news paper is in English. Although

when read by non-Saudis, the quotes will not seem daring; however, in a place like Saudi where the involvement with politics is like playing fire, they are quite bold. In his article on women's challenge with discourse, Al-Mutlaq said "To be fair, the struggle of Muslim women is not an easy one. This is sadly for the simple reason that their struggle is with some of the *Shariah* laws- laws that are based on exclusively male interpretations of the *Hadith*^{vi} and are reductionist and bigoted in nature. These male-biased interpretations have succeeded only in constructing barriers between the sexes, thus perpetuating women's marginality and relegation to the domestic sphere" (2007). Fatany also voice a very interesting opinion. She states that the change that must take place will be difficult for both men and women, "We have to admit that the role of women is still a controversial issue in Saudi society. Hard-liners still insist that the woman's place is in the home. Tribal culture persists among many in society, and changing attitudes is not going to be easy- for men or women. For men, it means women's wishes must be considered and respected. It also will require the realization that women in the workplace are a necessary part of our human resource base- not a competitive force but a complementary one. For women, it means that they cannot remain restrained by cultural barriers or dare not speak out or avail themselves of the opportunities offered. The need to change is imperative, and women must realize that they are entitled to enjoy their rights in society" (2007).

Saudi women face real struggles, and in order to succeed there are many obstacles to overcome. Although, the Saudi government continues to empower the religious police and restrict what girls can learn at school. Many women are turning towards a private education and jobs with private business that are more willing to higher qualified Saudi

women. Women are working hard to improve others ways of thinking about the female role in Saudi, and I can say for sure that they will meet great criticism form many, including other women. In conclusion, I leave you with parts of a poem by a famous Saudi columnist (originally in Arabic).

Imagine Being a Woman

By: Badria Al-Bisher.

Translated by: Farah Alsweel

Imagine being a woman, and always being in need of your male guardian's consent; not only according to Islamic jurisprudence in terms of a virgin's marriage mind you, but in every aspect and issue that may concern you. Imagine not being able to get your education without your male guardian's consent, even if you were applying for a PhD! Imagine not being able to work, to attempt to make ends meet, without his consent. Some are not even embarrassed to declare that women need the aforementioned approval in the private sector, as well!

Imagine being a woman, and being subject to harassment, beating, or murder, then when your picture is published in local newspapers, along with the criminals in all their murderous glory, there will still be those who ask if you, the victim, were veiled. There will still be those who, if veiled, will ask what you were doing out at such an hour; or that there must have been some action on your part that had triggered your husband to beat you to unconsciousness.

Imagine being a woman whose nose, arms, and legs are now broken by your husband, and when you submit a complaint to a judge saying: He beats me! He'd casually reply by saying: 'Yes? What else?' As if constant beating is the norm among all loving married couples, he is your husband after all!

Imagine being a woman and needing to take constant taxi rides just to run your everyday errands. Imagine having to be patient with a driver who does not understand you and having to tolerate the intolerable cultural barriers, just to get where you want. Imagine having to wait for your kid brother everyday, just so he can take you to work. Imagine hiring countless drivers who learn how to drive using the car you own, who practice at your expense, and whom you coach for months and months on end until you exhaustedly sigh “what kind of life is this?” All this because you are a woman, and thus are not permitted to drive.

Imagine being a woman who writes a weekly column for a newspaper, and every time she writes about your concerns, your matters, issues pertaining to your frustration and unemployment, and the cases performed against you at our own courts, they start saying: ‘Pay no attention to her, it's all chit chat, female chit chat, little else’

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Footnotes

ⁱ “The ulama are men who study the Quran, the Muslim Holy Book, and the Hadith, the tradition of what the prophet Muhammed said and did, and who work as religious scholars to apply the Sharia, which is the body of teaching and prescription that comes from the quran and the Hadith, which constitutes the basic law of Saudi Arabia”. (Al Rawaf, Simmons, 1991, p. 288)

ⁱⁱ The Muslim holy book believed to be the words of God.

ⁱⁱⁱ Religious instruction.

^{iv} The body of Islamic law; the legal framework inspired by the Quran.

^v Legal male guardian.

^{vi} The words and deeds of the prophet Mohammad.