

Unveiling Women's Empowerment: Exploring the Liberation Movement in Saudi Arabia



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Pages: 166 –175

DOI: 10.31703/gsr.2023(VIII-I).13

URL: [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2023\(VIII-I\).15](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2023(VIII-I).15)

Abstract: In 2018, Saudi Arabia underwent significant social and political transformations led by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman as part of the National Transformation Program. The program aimed to bring about economic prosperity, cultural progressiveness, and political favorability within the country. One of the most groundbreaking changes during this period was the removal of the driving ban for women, which had profound implications for both Saudi Arabian society and the global community. This research focuses on analyzing the portrayal of gender rights in online media publications and websites. A quantitative content analysis methodology was employed to investigate various aspects of media coverage related to women's rights. A sample of eight international online articles was selected for analysis, specifically examining the lifting of the driving ban and the overall development of gender rights in Saudi Arabia. Media frames were identified, and distinct categories were established to assess the perspectives presented in the articles.

Key Words: Women's liberation, Saudi Arabia, Social development, Political change, Gender rights, Media coverage

Introduction

In the last many years, the Gulf region has seen a lot of changes in the socio-cultural, economic and political situation of women. Few of the countries in the region adopted positive changes, while others became more and more rigid. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Gulf region has seriously considered taking steps towards the improvement of socio-political changes. Of these, women's rights have also been a factor of consideration. Although a very gradual improvement can be seen, however, that cannot be generalized for all Gulf States and all aspects of life. Even if women have a role in decision-making, that does mean they have been empowered completely.

Research conducted by the European Parliaments Directorate General for Internal Policies in 2014 shed light on the condition of women in the Gulf States. The study revealed that gender discrimination is deeply ingrained in the legal system, leading to the imposition of severe limitations on women's public presence, personal liberties, and access to personal growth. The Gulf States, predominantly characterized by patriarchal structures and conservative religious, social, and cultural norms, enforce these restrictions. Notably, Saudi Arabia stands out as the country with the most stringent policies, systematically depriving women of their rights and restricting their opportunities.

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In their scholarly article, Alhareth, Alhareth, and Dighrir (2015) emphasize the distinctiveness and intricacy of Saudi Arabian culture. They highlight Saudi Arabia's notable cultural homogeneity, which stems from its tribal and Islamic associations. This cultural fabric creates a one-of-a-kind environment that sets Saudi Arabia apart from other societies. Because Islamic laws are so deeply rooted in this tribe-based country, it is very difficult to separate the two. It is difficult to distinguish between the religious laws and the tribal customs, as they are a mirror image of each other.

Saudi Arabia's strict implementation of Islamic principles has led to a reputation of limited women's mobility and public engagement compared to other Arab and Muslim societies (Alsaleh). Amidst recent events, Saudi Arabia's election to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women has sparked significant debate. The selection, which occurred through a confidential voting process, has generated controversy and drawn criticism from the UN Watchdog and other observers. The country has been labelled as "the world's most misogynistic regime" (Global News, 2017) in an online newspaper article.

Problem Statement

For the past many decades, the Saudi government has followed very strict policies for women. Women have always been under the guardianship of a male member of the family i.e., father, husband, brother or son. However, very recently, the ban on women driving has been lifted. This has brought a sigh of relief to the activists who had fought hard for women's liberation. Certain factions in the current government are in favour of this development; however, this move has its own share of critics.

The media all over the world is addressing the issue as it looks at it as a step towards more such progressive moves.

Objective

- to investigate the treatment given to the news regarding women's liberation in Saudi Arabia.
- To analyze the Saudi Arabian legislative development for gender rights

Literature

As an observation it can be said that there is a sufficient body of literature on women's empowerment,

however, there is not much that can be found on the efforts made for the liberation of Saudi women. The reason for this may be that women in Saudi Arabia are not guaranteed the same rights as perhaps women from some other Arab countries, who have been empowered in many ways. However, recently, due to the untiring and persistent efforts of some Saudi female activists, there have been a few areas which have seen development, the lifting of the driving ban being one of them.

Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, have long relied on expatriates as their primary labour force, resulting in limited representation and participation of women in social, political, and economic aspects. Saudi Arabia is often portrayed in Western media as a symbol of women's oppression. While women are prohibited from forming their own development or activist groups, there are still individuals, both within the country and abroad, working towards the liberation of Saudi women.

One of the key concerns for women's rights activists is the lifting of the driving ban, imposed on women through a royal decree. The confinement of Saudi women within their homes has been a generational issue. However, suppression not only fuels anger but also sparks rebellion, with a small group of individuals becoming catalysts for change. Harriet Alexander (2013) highlighted in her newspaper article that women who dared to drive in Riyadh in 1990, despite facing opposition from rioting clerics, played a significant role in initiating change. This protest ultimately led to the formalization of an official edict by the Interior Ministry, prohibiting women from driving (Alexander, 2013).

Driving as a movement and freedom for it to be called a right have been explicitly discussed by Rajkhan (2014) in her research, where she states that driving is a human, religious and legal right of every Saudi woman. Human rights as it is a necessity and not really a luxury because in a critical situation, a woman will not need to be dependent. A religious right because women will not have to be dependent on strangers for public commuting, and a legal right because according to the traffic laws of Saudi Arabia, there is no mention of licenses being issued to only men.

Jahangir (2017) in her issue brief is of the opinion that a reaction by the religious groups is understandable as they would fear that the Saudi women are much influenced by the Western world and just by driving they will adopt the Western way of life. However, one

must argue this not to be the case. Driving a car is not the only way to be liberated; it is also the liberation in the mind. This liberation also came with the introduction of social media in people's lives, as it gave them another platform to voice their concerns and make the world aware of the goings on.

A report by Human Rights Watch (2016) brings to light the fact that a woman's life is controlled by a man from birth until death. The male members of the family, like husband, son, father and even a brother, have guardianship of women. This hinders any decision-making on the part of the woman herself but is done by the guardians. A contrary view to all this can be seen in Vision 2030, as envisioned by King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al –Saud, who wishes to see Saudi Arabia at the forefront of the world economy. Providing equal opportunities to all is the primary goal, with women being in the lead for the development of society and the economy.

Dunham (2013) suggests that, unlike women in Saudi Arabia, women in other Islamic countries have become more empowered than before in many aspects, and unfortunately Saudi Arabian women are still lagging behind. A very interesting yet long-awaited development that has taken place is the lifting of the ban on driving for women in Saudi Arabia. This step has taken the Western media by storm, as it was a common understanding the world over that Saudi women were oppressed as a result of their age-old traditions of male superiority and oppression. Hassan Ammar (2018) in his news article notes, "From June, women in Saudi Arabia will be allowed to drive for the first time in the nation's history. The decision was announced last year and is part of a wider package of reforms aimed at modernizing the ultra-conservative kingdom, led by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman."

Although there were women drivers in Saudi Arabia, they were still under a lot of scrutiny, and some even feared for their life. Due to the gender segregation inherent in the Saudi tradition and culture, allowing women to drive would mean having contact with men, and would also mean giving freedom to women to move around. However, after the lifting of the driving ban, there are other areas and concerns that activists are eager to work on, such as male guardianship, which according to Human Rights Watch (2016) is "the most significant impediment to realizing women's rights in the country."

According to a National Geographic article, Saudi Arabia's unique policies of prohibiting women from driving cars and mandating adult female citizens to live under male guardianship are widely known and met with disapproval globally (Gorney, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Within the research article, a feminist media theory serves as the underlying theoretical framework. This theory encompasses a range of philosophies, concepts, and logic that seek to apply feminist principles and concepts to various aspects of media processes. These include hiring, production, distribution, representation in news and entertainment, and reception by audiences. Unlike other approaches that conceal their political nature, feminist theorizing openly acknowledges its political stance. It delves into discussions of power dynamics, exploring how power is obtained and maintained.

Scholars working within the realm of feminist media theory hold a deep appreciation for the significance of gender in shaping individual identity and influencing personal experiences. There has long been a prevailing belief that if women were given control over the production of media content, the resulting output would exhibit higher quality and present entirely different narratives.

Both the field of feminist media theories and the broader discipline of feminist media studies are increasingly placing emphasis on the importance of international and multidisciplinary research. Such work critically examines the intersections of media convergence and globalization, recognizing their profound impact on gender issues.

Methodology

The methodology that would be applied would be content analysis to analyze how the issue has been dealt with by the media. A total of 19 articles will be selected, articles will be selected on the basis of important milestones achieved in the last 2 years for women's rights and representation in Saudi Arabia in pursuit of Vision 2030. The articles will be chosen from various global web news sources through the keyword search option on Google Search Engine's News platform. The final selection will include algorithmically organized articles by relevance and interest. International newspaper articles will be analyzed for media frames and various categories of analysis will be developed which would highlight the

stance that would be observed. The conceptualization and operationalization of terms will also be explained for a better understanding of the context.

Conceptualization & Operationalization:

State Objectives

Conceptualization – Interest of state, measurable goals, policy-driven actions

Operationalization – by the word "state objectives", the researcher means that the objectives are set for the country by the head of state.

State Image

Conceptualization - Perception of a country based on their traditions and emotions, Human Rights Friendly, Conservative, Traditional/Religious

Operationalization – By the word "state image", the researcher means the kind of image the country/ state has in the national or global arena

Role of Leadership

Conceptualization – The researcher emphasizes that leaders have a crucial responsibility to actively participate in formulating, implementing, monitoring, and overseeing policies that prioritize the needs of their constituents. The operationalization of the term "role of leadership" refers to the specific role played by state leaders in driving the development of the country.

Social Identity

Conceptualization – Perception about one's self-based on the intergroup understanding

Operationalization – By the word "social identity", the researcher means the way individuals identify themselves in a social context.

Cultural Transformation

Conceptualization – To transform a culture, it is necessary to address not only the values and behaviours of present leaders, managers, and supervisors but also the institutional legacy left by past leaders. This includes the underlying values ingrained within the organization's structures, policies, systems, procedures, and incentives. Successful cultural change requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses both the current and historical aspects of leadership and institutional practices.

Operationalization – By the term "cultural transformation", the researcher means the way inherent cultural practices of the past will change in the present and for the future.

Religious Context

Conceptualization – The term "religious context" pertains to a statement or remark that pertains to religious beliefs or perspectives. The interpretation of religious context can vary among individuals, as it depends on their personal understanding and beliefs regarding religious matters.

Operationalization – By the term "religious context", the researcher means the way a certain phenomenon is seen from a religious perspective.

Economic Opportunities

Conceptualization – Investments, Providing employment opportunities, improving trade productivity

Operationalization – By the term "economic opportunities", the researcher means the prospects an individual or group of people can get in terms of developing their economic stability.

Foreign Policy Implications

Conceptualization – Reforms and Changes

Operationalization – By the term "foreign policy implications", the researcher means the impact any action or decision will have on the foreign policy of a country.

Findings & Results

Ever since the announcement of the lifting of the ban on driving for Saudi Arabian women, various media outlets have covered this issue. Various categories of analysis as well as their coverage by media are given below:

State Objectives

According to BBC, Saudi Arabia's state objectives, as outlined in Vision 2030, aim to modernize the country and align it more closely with the global community, as promoted by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. The National News Saudi Arabia also reported on the state objectives, highlighting that Vision 2030 is a comprehensive reform plan encompassing economic and social policies with the goal of reducing dependence on oil exports. As part of the social

objectives, the plan includes the opening of over 300 movie theatres by 2030. Sophie Alkhaled's article in *The Conversation* discusses how Saudi Arabia has been supporting female entrepreneurship in its National Development Plans for over a decade. The vision for 2030 seeks to stimulate economic transformation and diversify investments beyond the oil industry. In a statistical analysis by Brookings Press, the increase in women's participation in the Saudi labour force was measured, demonstrating the clear objective of Vision 2030 to achieve a significant rise of over 30% in female workforce contribution.

State Image

According to the Al Jazeera news article "Saudi women driving ban lifted: Euphoria and sarcasm," the state image of Saudi Arabia was predominantly negative due to the country being the only one in the world that prohibited women from driving. However, after the ban was lifted, a positive shift in the state image was observed, with a Saudi academic congratulating the successful move. BBC also reported on the lifting of the driving ban in the article "Saudi Arabia driving ban on women to be lifted," highlighting the strict dress codes and restrictions on women's interactions with unrelated men. CNN's article "Saudi Arabia is giving women more freedom as it looks beyond oil" echoed similar sentiments, emphasizing the negative state image of the religious police arresting women's rights activists. Fortune magazine's article "It's absurd: How Saudi Arabia ended up on the UN Women's Rights Commission" portrayed a negative image of Saudi Arabia, referring to laws that suppress women's rights, such as driving and requiring permission from a male guardian. Global News mentioned Saudi Arabia's strict gender codes and dress requirements for women, further reinforcing a negative state image. The New York Times reported on the arrest of a women's rights activist holding a poster advocating for women's rights. However, The Jakarta Post shed an optimistic light on the envisioned reforms by Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, highlighting women's participation as a crucial pillar of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. An article by Samir Salama in Gulf News emphasized Saudi Arabia's significant progress in enabling women and strengthening their role in society, placing the country at the forefront of progressive nations.

Role of Leadership

According to Arab News, the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia has been lifted through a royal decree.

The decree encompasses the implementation of traffic regulations, including the issuance of driving licenses for both men and women. Additionally, the decree highlighted that the majority of the Council of Senior Scholars acknowledged that religion does not prohibit women from driving, and therefore, they did not oppose this decision.

In an article on the BBC news website, a tweet from a critic, taken as a negative stance said, "As far as I remember, Sharia scholars have said it was haram (forbidden) for women to drive. How come it has suddenly become halal (permissible)?" On the other hand, after the development, the role of leadership has been positive as "Saudi Arabia's King Salman has issued a decree allowing women to drive for the first time, to the joy of activists." It was also reported, "The kingdom recently faced a backlash from conservatives on social media after allowing women to participate in National Day celebrations for the first time."

In a news report by CNN News, it was reported that Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman sees women's induction as a success to Vision 2030, which is his goal for a successful and developed kingdom.

The New York Times reported that "Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has spoken about embracing "moderate Islam" and increasing social freedoms." This can be taken as neutral before development. However, a positive stance was reported, "Though the guardian system remains on the books, a royal decree relaxed its grip in June and women are now allowed access to health care, education and travel without a guardian's permission."

In a report by Khaleej Times, as mentioned under state objectives it was highlighted that the Saudi government's recent change to permit females to ascend the ranks in its interior security forces is a part of a series of changes ratified by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to spread the rights of females in the kingdom. As part of his Vision 2030 initiative, Saudi ladies will be permitted to partake in several disciplines and in parts formerly restricted to males. (2021)

Social Identity

On the issue of social identity, Aljazeera reported, "a Saudi activist who was imprisoned for 72 days in the winter of 2014 for attempting to cross the UAE border into Saudi Arabia in her car". On the positive aspect, it was also reported by the same medium,

"The decision has sparked euphoria and disbelief among activists in the kingdom"

According to a BBC news report, it was reported that women have to abide by laws of strict dress codes and they must not have any interaction with men not related to them. In case of travel or health care, they must seek permission and be accompanied by a male guardian. An organizer of one of the campaigns, who has also been imprisoned for driving, said on the social networking site, Twitter, that Saudi Arabia would "never be the same again". On the positive side, many hashtags have been developed like, "I am my own guardian" and "Saudi Women Can Drive" and have gained a solid footing on social media.

CNN reported that according to Salman Al-Ansari, president of the Saudi American Public Relations Affairs Committee, "Mohammed Bin Salman understands the fact that granting women their basic rights is an essential factor for the success of his vision 2030." Moreover, it was also reported by the same media, "Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman is leading a bold plan to break the kingdom's reliance on oil, which requires a transformation of the economy and Saudi society".

As reported by Fortune magazine, about the social identity of Saudi women, they have to seek permission to perform even the most fundamental of tasks from their male guardian, like husband, father or son.

New York Times reported that two women appealed that Saudi women be granted the right to drive. In March 2008, one of them filmed herself driving a car and uploaded the film on YouTube to make the world aware of the ban. On a negative stance, social media was used to further the campaign during the Arab uprisings some years ago, as "Saudi female activists started the "Women2Drive" campaign. Women with international driver's licenses were asked to take to the roads and social media was sued to mobilize women.

In an article published on the website of Gulf News by Samir Salama (2021), it was reported that in recent years the Saudi nation also encouraged females to contest in the commercial areas by announcing legal corrections meant to protect women from discrimination in the work division, comprising of a prohibition on gender discrimination from retrieving monetary amenities, and dismissal of females in the course of their pregnancy and maternity sabbatical.

Tamayo, Koettl and Rivera (2021) have said to report on the factor of social identity in Brookings by quoting how reforms stretching from permitting women to drive cars to changes in the custody law, the labour rule, and family law, among many others have seemed to prove fruitful. It has allowed Saudi Arabia to become a top performer in the World Bank's 2021 report for Women, Business and Law.

Cultural Transformation

As reported by Aljazeera, "Saudi women are still under the male guardianship system, which among other things, prevents them from travelling without permission of the men in their family."

On a negative stance, BBC reported, "Only men were allowed licenses and women who drove in public risked being arrested and fined." On the other hand, as a positive step, "this decree is in line with a program called Vision 2030, promoted by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, to modernize Saudi society and bring it more into line with the rest of the world."

CNN reported the decree as having a futuristic approach to viewing women's development for the coming years. There was no negative stance on this aspect of reporting.

Global News reports, "Women are also prevented from interacting with men who they are not related to and must live under the supervision of a male guardian."

A neutral stance reported by Huffington Post before the development, "While women recently gained the right to vote and run for office, a woman still requires the permission of her husband or other male relatives to do basic tasks like opening a bank account, obtaining a passport or travelling abroad. Women are shamed for driving a car, wearing makeup or showing flesh, competing in sports, or going places where they might mix with men. Women running for office are not allowed to address men!"

According to New York Times, it was reported: "the 47 women who drove their cars in 1990 were arrested, lost their jobs and were prohibited from travelling." This gives a very negative stance on the past in Saudi Arabia. However, in the present it gives a slightly positive angle to the cultural transformation as it is reported, "Prince Mohammed is being credited for the effort to transform Saudi Arabia". However, the efforts of the activists of the past are being

acknowledged as well, as they suffered and sacrificed a lot for the women of today.

In an article in Brookings written by Tamayo, Koettl and Rivera (2021), it is said that among the cultural changes that have swept the kingdom by storm include women being able to use their businesses as a solid podium for political engagement and social change through everyday harmony exercises.

In terms of cultural transformation, Salama (2021) in Gulf News cited equality in the retirement age as one of the most important reforms that have been introduced in Saudi Arabia. It has effectively contributed to increasing the time of women's input to the development of the state economy.

Mina Aldroubi (2021) reported on a positive aspect in terms of cultural transformation saying that the authorities lifted a ban on women driving in June 2018 in National News Saudi Arabia. Since then, a chain of changes is encouraging females to take an extra prominent role in society. Accordingly, females no longer have to get consent from a male custodian to work, enrol for college or go through surgical procedures. Females have also been granted the right to register for marriage, childbirth or divorce by themselves, serve as guardians to juveniles and be handed over official family documents as needed.

Religious Context

Aljazeera reported, "senior Saudi scholar said women in the country should not be allowed to drive because they have "a quarter the brainpower of men". On the other hand, it was also reported as positivity, "Saudi Arabia's king issued a decree that women will now be able to obtain a driver's license".

BBC News reported, "Not everyone reacted positively, however, with conservative voices accusing the government of "bending the verses of Sharia".

CNN News is reported to have said, "The ruling royal family is likely to tread carefully to avoid a backlash from conservative religious authorities who, for decades, have exercised enormous influence".

Huffington Post reported for religious context, "Women in Saudi Arabia are subject to conservative laws and religious (Muslim) principles."

Economic Opportunities

Arab News reported that lifting the driving ban on women, "The decision will help boost the number of

women in the workforce, boost car sales, as well as provide jobs in driving schools and detention centres. Companies like Uber and Careem were among the first to promise to create opportunities for female drivers."

According to BBC, a positive report was, "Saudi women, many of whom are extremely well-educated and ambitious, have been waiting for their chance to participate fully in their country's economy."

CNN News reports that "It will allow for greater mobility inside and outside the country, which allows for more efficient economic activity and happiness. There are also signs of progress towards increasing the participation of women in the workforce -- a key Vision 2030 goal -- particularly in finance and technology. In February, three top jobs in finance, including the head of the stock exchange, were filled by women. Citigroup has just appointed a woman to head the bank's operations in the kingdom."

In an article on the website of Arab News, Lama Alhamawi (2021) reported how new business initiatives aim to offer women resources to aid them in pursuing occupations as CEOs, shareholders and entrepreneurs so that they're able to contribute in areas of employment creation and constructive economic transformation. One such project named Ignited will let Saudi women interact with American start-up owners and professionals through workshops and networking to construct associations, share information and cultivate partnership prospects.

In terms of factual findings, Brookings quotes how the employment rate of Saudi females has been progressively increasing between the end of 2018 and 2020. Private sector employment increased between most economic happenings. Statistically speaking, women's employment in labour-intensive divisions such as manufacturing, accommodation and food, and construction grew by 14, 40, and 9 per cent, respectively (Tamayo et al., 2021).

Saudi Arabia aims to fill the oil and gas industry's talent gap by introducing admissions for women to the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals as told by the Gulf News (Salama, 2021).

Consequently, according to Mina Aldroubi (2021) in National News, the up-and-coming projects will elevate tourism as the kingdom attempts to purposely stray from oil as the main cause of income. The regime is also pushing for overseas businesses to

capitalize on and create local HQs in the capital, Riyadh.

Foreign Policy Implications

Aljazeera reported that the Saudi ambassador to the United States reportedly said that Saudi women with a driver's licence from any of the GCC states would be allowed to drive immediately in the country."

BBC reported about the foreign implication that "US President Donald Trump said it was a "positive step" towards promoting women's rights." The medium also reported that "The country's US ambassador, Prince Khaled bin Salman, confirmed that women would not have to get male permission to take driving lessons, and would be able to drive anywhere they liked."

Fortune magazine reported that even "Helen Clark, the former prime minister of New Zealand and former administrator of the UN Development Program, appeared to defend the vote. In a tweet, she said, "It's important to support those in the country who are working for change for women. Things are changing, but slowly."

As reported by the National News Saudi Arabia, the reforms introduced in Vision 2030 are part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's initiative to charm foreign investment, dissuade the economy from total reliance on hydrocarbons, fortify the private

division and produce maintainable professions for Saudis (Aldroubi, [2021](#)).

Conclusion

As various news reports have indicated, the stance has been both negative as well as positive in reporting by international media regarding lifting the ban on driving. It is evident that religion and culture played an important part in restricting women in a lot of aspects. However, since the initiation of the lifting of the ban, it has come as a sigh of relief for the activists who not only suffered greatly but also sacrificed either their jobs or their respect at the hands of the religious police.

Media was taken by storm after the decree was announced by the King, as it would not just have national implications, but also change the national image of the Kingdom on the international front. As has been reported, women needed permission from their male guardians, i.e., father, husband or son, to move around or perform any important tasks. Now that will also change as they will now have the freedom to do things without seeking anyone's permission.

Such positive steps will further create goodwill as they ascertain the inclusion of women in the national workforce. This will have twofold benefits; the economy will get better and job opportunities will be created. Many educated and talented women will now be able to come to the forefront and lead teams in the economic sector.

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