



Despite Worthy Reforms, Saudi Women are Still Second-class Citizens

by *Hatoon Al Fassi*

*Saudi progress toward gender
equality is tangible but fails to
address the root causes*

The reality of women lacking full citizenship rights is neither new nor exclusive to Muslim, Arab, or Saudi women. It is a patriarchal tradition that dates at least as far back as ancient Greece, when the concept of citizenship was first established in the fifth century BCE and only included men. As both the past and present demonstrate, granting anyone her or his rights is not necessarily a straight forward task, as it can conflict with political, religious, economic, and patriarchal power.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, all of these variables come together to collide against women's citizen-

ship rights. A Saudi culture of misogyny based on a hardcore reading of Islam fused with a harsh capitalist economy has exploited women for decades if not centuries. However, some recent developments—like allowing women to drive starting June 2018—are empowering women in the kingdom. Yet these recent reforms still do not go far enough to free Saudi women from their second-class citizenship status.

Saudi citizenship, in context

Like many other Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia embraced modernity very recently. The country was established in 1932 by King Abdulaziz bin Saud, who unified the kingdom under his family's name. Ibn Saud established a national identity by gathering and assembling the tribesmen under a conservative view of Islam. The concept of "citizen" developed under Ibn Saud adopted the *jus sanguinis* model, which incorrectly interpreted a Quranic text (al-Ahzab 33:5) that nationality is strictly patrilineal. *Jus sanguinis* is a patriarchal system compared to the more equitable *jus soli*, which confers citizenship by place of birth rather than by blood. Saudi Arabia, along with 15 other Arab states still maintain the *jus sanguinis* system today.

It was not until the 1970s that Saudi women became more educated and began to call for their rights. Because the religious understanding of genealogical affiliation in Saudi Arabia is patrilineal, the notion of citizenship became a religious domain—and recognized the male citizen only. In the past, citizenship based on male lineage was not just limited to Saudi Arabia or Islamic interpretations—Western countries, with different religions and varying levels of secularism, followed that same tradition. *Jus sanguinis* was in fact the world norm in the 19th and mid-20th centuries.

In recent years, women's right to pass their citizenship onto their children has become a major demand for activists in the Gulf region and across the Arab world. Even though all Gulf states have at least one article in their constitutions or basic laws emphasizing citizenship equality, women are not able (with the exception of the UAE,

where citizenship may be passed to children of Emirati mothers when children reach six years of age) to pass on their nationality to their children—citizenship is determined by the male father. For this reason, in November 2017 women formed a coalition called “The Gulf Campaign for the Rights of Children of a National Mother,” which is calling for equal treatment between male and female citizens when it comes to citizenship rights. Women in the Gulf are very vocal in voicing their dissatisfaction with the states’ insistence on mixing citizen’s rights with religious rights.

Personally, I had a long struggle with *Al-Riyadh* newspaper to publish a piece explaining the difference between citizenship and religious rights—my editors thought I was stepping on sacred grounds. Luckily, it was eventually published and it joined a growing list of writings on the still-unresolved issue of women passing on their citizenship to their children.

Window dressing or genuine reforms?

There are some areas where the children of Saudi women and non-Saudi men are getting benefits—particularly in the education and health sectors. But the benefits for these children are temporary and terminate once the mother dies. The sons and daughters of a Saudi woman and non-Saudi man are also able to collect points all their lives that go toward naturalization, but eventual citizenship is not guaranteed. These children spend all their lives as foreigners in their mother’s home country, exposed to painful official and social discrimination. Many prefer to leave their countries and live abroad where they can maintain their dignity and raise their kids away from these discriminatory practices. With 2012 data showing 750,000 Saudi women married to non-Saudi men—the country has an average fertility rate of 3 children per woman—there could be well over one million living under such circumstances.

Despite everything, the Saudi state is to some degree trying to solve the problem of gender inequality. Yet Saudi Arabia still fails for the most part to address the root of the problem. Recent news about ending the female driving ban are positive

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steps but they don’t change the reality that Saudi woman are second-class citizens in their own country.

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