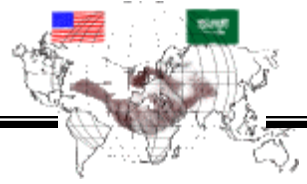


Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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In Rare Public Dialogue, Saudi Women Talk Rights

By Faiza Saleh Ambah

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In Rare Public Dialogue, Saudi Women Talk Rights

By Faiza Saleh Ambah

JEDDAH, SAUDI ARABIA – Saudi women cannot check into a hotel without a male family member. Stories about the right to drive and spousal abuse are often kept out of the kingdom's media by editors concerned for their jobs.

But in the past year, some of those taboos have been lifted, at least temporarily. In fact, when the first government-sponsored conference on women's issues was announced early this year, there was a spontaneous and unprecedented outpouring of public support.

Groups of women, individuals, and members of charitable and cultural societies from across the country flooded the council's offices with working papers, surveys, suggestions, and demands. "The announcement made women act on a need that has been building up for years," says Fatima Naseef, an Islamic scholar and university lecturer. Dr. Naseef got together with 32 women from different parts of Saudi Arabia and put together a seven-page document of their requests, including a safe house for battered spouses and a female-staffed office to advise women on their rights under Islamic law concerning divorce, child custody, support and alimony.

The three-day conference on women, which ends Monday, is the third in a series of forums initiated by the country's reform-minded Crown Prince Abdullah. It follows previous meetings on political reform and combating terrorists. The forums' recommendations are nonbinding, but are part of the House of Saud's strategy to pressure militant religious figures and the extremists who have attacked the vital Saudi oil sector, killing and kidnapping foreigners. The fact that the conferences are being held at all, say some analysts, is an indication that conservative clerics are on the defensive.

Spurred by the coming conference, women's issues have been given unprecedented attention on Saudi television programs, radio shows, newspapers, and private meetings in recent weeks. Saudis have seen debates on the pros and cons of women driving, how the court system and divorce laws are skewed in favor of men, the high unemployment women suffer, and whether segregated workplaces violate Islamic law.

Earlier this month the Council of Ministers - the most powerful government body - issued a nine-point plan urging the creation of more job opportunities for women.

Saudi authorities have just approved the establishment of an all-women industrial city that will host training centers and employ approximately 10,000 women at more than 80 factories, the city's main investor announced Saturday. Hessa Aloun, who runs an investment company and is also a member of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, told the Associated Press that two companies, one Chinese and one Malaysian, have already signed agreements to start training programs in early 2005. "We have a large women cadre that wants to work in the industrial field, but without proper training this is not possible," Ms. Aloun said.

Still, even the nine-point plan includes the caveat that all reforms must be in accord with *sharia* or Islamic law. And what is permissible in Islam is open to interpretation. Saudi activists say that is precisely why progress has been so hard to come by.

"In Saudi Arabia it's taking us a long time to move forward because we're still discussing basics. We're still debating whether it's permissible in Islam for women to drive or to work alongside men. Neither is against our religion, the taboo has only been passed down through local traditions and customs," says Maha Fitaihi, one of the conference's participants.

Though reform has been on the Crown Prince's agenda for years, the events of Sept. 11, in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi, and a campaign of violence by militant extremists in Saudi Arabia that has taken the lives of at least 80 people, have accelerated the need for change.

While just as many females graduate from college as men, they have limited job opportunities, and make up just 5 percent of the private work force. Most women work as teachers but there are a growing number of doctors, journalists, and television presenters. The problem is not only minimal work opportunities, but also logistics, argue women. Saudi women are not allowed to drive cars, and cannot travel, marry, or get identification papers without the permission of a male guardian.

"This extreme dependence on a male guardian is a handicap," says Johara al-Angary, head of the family section of the newly formed Human Rights Commission. "The women who most need work are often those who don't have a husband or male children, and there are many of them," says Mrs. Angary, who's been working with charity organizations for more than 20 years.

According to a survey of 150 women printed in the al-Madina newspaper, women complained about the lack of a judicial entity to help them learn about and apply their rights, unemployment, the inability to travel and represent themselves in court and other official offices without a male guardian, and a lack of recourse in case of violence against them.

Television anchor Rania al-Baz says one of the most important things Saudi women need is social awareness. Mrs. Baz gained notoriety in April when she was brutally beaten by her husband, and photos appeared in the local papers of the TV personality lying unconscious in a hospital bed, her face battered and bruised. The fact that she allowed her picture to be published

and was willing to talk to the press broke a social taboo and shed a spotlight on the widespread problem of physical abuse.

"The reason more women don't complain about physical abuse by their husbands is social conditioning. We're not taught to speak out and ask for our rights. We need to change the way we view ourselves and our lives. We need change from the inside out," says Mrs. Baz. She is now working as a consultant with the Human Rights Commission and the Committee of the Muslim Woman and Child.

Mrs. Baz, who suffered eleven fractures and will undergo another operation next week, is optimistic about the future.

"I'm not sure I can go back to television because my face might not be the same again," she says. "But I will continue to try to educate women. The fact that we're even having this conference on women is a big step forward. It's a success not only for the 35 [female] participants but for all Saudi women," she says.

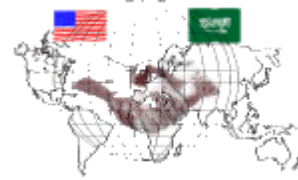
But not everyone in Saudi is pleased about the prospect of empowering women. On Saturday, a petition in the name of 32 women was circulated among the conference participants, al-Watan newspaper reported.

The paper printed a copy of the petition which asked the conference's participants to stand against "the coming flood of negative changes facing women .. The purpose of women working and driving cars is to get women out of their homes, which would have negative social effects and .. lead to immoral behavior," the statement said. Mixing between the sexes and desegregation of schools is against Islam, the statement said. Those asking for change were a minority not representative of the majority of Saudis.

Despite such views, Mrs. Angary says that change is coming. "For the first time I feel really optimistic. I think now's our time. Rights are not given, they're taken. And we're at a turning point. This is our moment. We need to seize it now. Otherwise future generations will never forgive us," she says.

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