The Cultural Change regarding women in Saudi Arabia: Ethnohistorical Study

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Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

Abstract

This article presents the experience of a PhD dissertation that provides a new narrative of the change of culture regarding women in Saudi Arabia. The main question of the research was is: *How has the culture regarding women in Saudi society developed since the beginning of the twentieth century?* The study explored the economic, social and historical context of the cultural change in Saudi Arabia to understand how the culture react to these circumstances. An ethnohistory approach was incorporated as it offers the facility to record the change of native culture, which contributes to our understanding of current culture. The main data method is in-depth interviews with seventeen women from three generations about their life stories. The results present an ethnographic portrait of the lives of Saudi women and the changes of the culture according to their stories through the last century and how different economic, political and social factors have affected this culture. The study contributes to knowledge as it provides a new narrative about the change of the culture regarding women in Saudi Arabia through the stories of women themselves. It provided novel data through the memories of the women themselves, which has never been done previously. Furthermore, it has preserved a valuable historical 'treasure' of information about the culture, which otherwise would be lost forever with the memories of these women.

Keywords: cultural change, Saudi Arabia, women, ethnohistory, oral history, storytelling.

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia was ranked 141 out of 144 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index by the UN Global Gender Gap Report 2016. Moreover, it is known that until 2018 women in Saudi Arabia were not allowed to drive and they were under a male-guardianship policy. However, since 2001, the country passed through a reforming stage towards women's rights. After the event of 9/11, a national reforming project was established by King Abdullah to counter radicalism and terrorism in the country. Empowering women was a major objective of the project and, since then, it has made several achievements such as giving women citizenship cards, facilitating judicial proceedings, giving women rights to vote and run in the municipal elections and they were given seats in the Shura national parliament. Moreover, women were given, for the first time, high positions in the government such as deputy ministers and chancellors, and finally they were allowed to drive in 2018 and the end of male-guardianship was announced in 2019.

Nevertheless, referencing the situation of Saudi women merely to government policies, without discussing the socio-cultural context is superficial, as even if the policies are changed, the major challenge is in the socio-cultural barriers. In a conservative and closed society, cultural obstacles are not as easy to overcome as outsiders may think. Furthermore, countering the prominent culture may exacerbate the situation by provoking further social resistance, radicalism or even terrorism as a result of feeling fear and threatened.

To better understand a phenomenon or a situation, scholars might explore the longer time-span of this phenomenon in the past decades to reveal its historical and cultural specificities (Yang and Clark, 2015). The study attempts to go back to the beginning of the twentieth century and gather data about the culture regarding women in Saudi Arabia, how has it developed? Most of the research in this area tries to use secondary data and depend

on interpretations of historical events. This study provides a new narrative through the memories of women themselves.

Throughout the stories of three generations of Saudi women, the change of the culture is addressed in the light of the general economic, political and social attributes of each epoch. Implementing the stories in accordance with other ethnohistorical data, an explanation of how different factors have affected the culture in different times was presented. The research seeks to answer a major question: **How has the culture regarding women in Saudi society developed since the beginning of the twentieth century?**

An ethnohistory approach was incorporated as it offers the facility to record the change of native culture, which contributes to our understanding of current culture (Rogers & Wilson, 1993, p.8).

2. Implementing Ethnohistory and Oral History

The study considered the beginning of the twentieth century and gathers data about the culture of women in Saudi Arabia: how has it developed? Most of the research in this area relied on secondary data and interpretations of historical events.

2.1 Oral History Through Storytelling

Not only can oral history deconstruct dominant, existing discourses of the past by providing new information and different points of view, the spoken word also conveys emotions and reproduces local dialects that can be lost in writing (Hajek, 2014, p. 3). The study traced cultural changes through the life stories of seventeen women. The researcher interviewed a sample of ordinary women from different generations and documented their life stories. The main stories were listed before analysis with other data in order to produce a narrative of cultural change. The sample consisted of three

generations of women: 1) **The pre-oil boom generation**: eight women who were born before 1950 and lived before and after the oil boom and its economic effect. 2) **The Sahwa generation**: four women who were born between 1960 and 1980 and lived before and after the Sahwa phase. The Sahwa is the Arabic term of what was called the 'Awakening of Islam' phase. This phase represents the time between the 1980s and 1990s, when radical Islamic ideology has spread among the society. 3) **The social network generation**: five women who were born after 1990 and have used the internet and social media since their childhood or early teenage years.

The members of the sample were selected from various regions and cultural backgrounds. An appeal was broadcasted for interviewees on Twitter and Ask.fm. The researcher asked different people (of various attitudes and types of followers) to help by re-broadcasting the appeal. Dozens of offers for interviews were received (across all three generations). This large response gave the researcher the opportunity to select participants randomly as practicality limited the number of individuals could be interviewed. Seventeen interviewees were selected from different cities.

2.2 Using Archives and Historical Data

In the study, a particular methodology was employed: when a woman mentioned a historical event, tradition, or practice in her story, a further investigation was conducted to find corroborative data for illustration and support. There was no limit to a specific or restricted number or type of documents. The process was open and flexible. The supportive secondary data included traditional poems, folklore, travelers' diaries, photos, paintings, personal experience, novels, newspapers, magazines, flyers, TV programs, interviews, and other elements that could be considered reflective of culture. Any reliable, relevant, and available resources that could provide information

about the culture was used in order to broaden the picture of the cultural situation in each era.

3. Results

The outcome narrative was divided into historical eras that are not explicit time stages with rigid from-to dates; rather, they are general themes that Saudi society went through since the last century. These are: 1) The desert: the pre-unification stage: when the majority of the population used to live a nomadic life; 2) The emergence of the State: the inner migration to towns and new cities; 3) The oil boom: the leap in the wealth of oil with all its socio-economic consequences; 4) The Islamic revival 'Sahwa': when the movement of Islamic Revival has spread; 5) The stage of 9/11: the shock of 9/11, the national social reforming project and the decline of Sahwa; and 6) The stage of social media: the era of the debate platforms of social media and its influence on the culture.

The culture was covered through five dimensions of culture: 1) Roles in private and public spheres; 2) Work and financial independency; 3) Marriage and divorce; 4) Relationships; and 5) Freedom of movement.

However, due to the limit of the space in this article, only the first four eras will be discussed and through merely three dimensions covered in each era.

3.1 The Desert: The Pre-Unification Stage: (before 1932)

Before the unification of Saudi Arabia, the majority (60-80%) of the population were traveling nomads Bedouins. The remaining population were either non-tribal or settled-tribal habitants who lived in villages or small towns and worked as farmers, local merchants, sheep owners, or in trade. The level of civilization varied between villages, small towns and big cities in the western region under the Turkish Ottoman

rule. The lack of resources, famines, poverty, attacks of infectious diseases and tribal battles were so common at that stage. The living conditions were dreadful.

3.1.1 Roles in Private and Public Spheres

In this era, it was difficult to differentiate between private and public sphere as the majority of the population were Bedouins. In the camp, the tribe represents the big family and the society at the same time. The 'home' as private sphere was an open tent 'Bait Al-Sha'ar' where people gather and drink coffee. With no notion of 'house' or walls, the borders between private and public spheres were not sophisticated.

Apparently, there was a sort of traditional roles in the tribe; 'women used to knit and cook and men go for hunting' Safiya (participant) said. However, it is difficult to consider the Bedouin women roles as solely traditional, particularly when comparing them to women in urban areas.

It is clear that women were regarded as being inferior to men; this was witnessed by travellers such as Burckhardt (1830, p.350). They were with almost no access to authority or power positions in the tribe. Burckhardt (1830) stated that 'although women were seldom treated with neglect or indifference, they [were] always taught to consider that their sole business is cooking and working' (p.350). Nevertheless, Bedouin women had roles that were not available for women in the villages. According to the interviews, women were responsible for heavy work such as installing tents, slaughtering animals for food and they used to help men to carry the cargo when travelling.

The interviewees, Melha, Nora, Roqaya, Eda and Safiya described their daily routine roles in daily routine in similar ways: shepherding, firewood gathering,

cooking and knitting. However, they emphasized that these roles were not discriminated on grounds of sex or age.

Participants stated that while usually children did shepherding, men did camel herding, because it is difficult to control camels. But 'this was not written in stone, sometimes a woman did camel herding when there was no one else to do it in her family' (Melha, participant). Almost all the Bedouin interviewees agreed that these roles were general and depended on the ability and circumstances. One example of this flexibility is Eda's story. Her father took good care of her and her

Figure 1: A photo of unknown Bedouin man with his wife (between 1920-1940). We can see his child in his lap while he is grinding the coffee beans and his wife is sitting next to him.

siblings when her mother's left after their divorce: "He did all the house work. He used to cook for us, feed us, clean, wash dishes and shower my baby brother". When other interviewees were asked if this was acceptable and could be represented as a common cultural practice, they approved. Even in the villages, a participant mentioned that she was taught how to bake bread and cook some traditional dishes by her father who was better at cooking than her mother.

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

The stories give an indication that even though they may seem traditional, the roles in private spheres at that time were flexible and dependent on the circumstances and needs. Photos taken by travellers in that era shows this flexibility and spontaneity dealing with the roles. Men are taking care of some children (see: Figure 5, Figure 6), men and women working together (see: Figure 8, **Error! Reference source not found.** and Figure 10).

Figure 2: These two photos were taken in 1924 by Gertrude Bell and shows Shaik Fahad Bin Hadhal, the great ruler of the Northern Anizah tribe, with his granddaughters.

In contrast, women in villages had more strict 'traditional' roles. According to the stories, they had almost no access to public spheres. Modhi, Mezna and Amra (participants) confirmed that when girls started their puberty they were prevented from going out of their houses. Mezna stated that the strictness varied between villages and regions.

Nevertheless, the stories reveal that women in villages could have their own properties and business and take control of their own lives without the intervention of male relatives. Mezna's (participant) mother lived alone and managed her business and home.

Figure 3: A woman holding a wooden pillar to set up a tent.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the arrangement of marriage in several stories was managed by women themselves. Mezna stated that her mother arranged her two first marriages. Modhi's grandmother arranged her marriage without even consulting her father. Melha stated that her father was sympathetic with her when she ran away from her new husband but her mum was strict; 'She threated me with a stick to return to my husband's tent'. These scenes give signs that women's decision in their private spheres was not as negative as could be anticipated.

The Bedouins used to move from one site to another every few days searching for water and grass for their sheep. 'when travelling, women were everything' Melha said. She described how the women were in charge of the packing process, arranging the cargo and, when arriving, they were responsible for choosing the location of the tents and setting them up.

Figure 5: Photos of a family from Mutair tribe packing the luggage on the camel

Figure 4: A woman and a man preparing for travel

Arming is an additional aspect of the roles. Bedouin women were supposed to protect their families' possessions when their men were away. It was common for them to own a weapon and use it. Through her story, Melha mentioned her grandmother's Turkish rifle.

My grandmother owned a luxurious Turkish rifle that was richly inlaid with silver and brass. It was an extraordinary and famous one; everybody wished to own it. Many chiefs and rich people gave her fine offers to buy, yet she refused. [...] She used it when thieves tried to attack her sheep

> *once. My husband saw in his dream once that she gave him her rifle and*
> *he was privileged.*

Safiya (participant) also told about her mother owning a rifle that her uncle gave her. When asked if this was common, they confirmed that it was quite common; a woman either has her own rifle or her husband gives her one of his owns before he travels.

Another cultural practise that illustrates women's roles is their ability to give protection to strangers in a cultural practise called 'Dakhel'. This practise means giving security and protection to a stranger who is in fleeing from danger. When a stranger asks a woman for her protection and she gives him her word of honour and touches him, then his protection becomes the responsibility of the whole tribe, even if they found out that he killed a son of theirs. The woman's word in this practise is as firm and as worthy as a man's. Burckhardt stated witnessing this practice during his travels (Burckhardt, 1830).

3.1.2 Work and Financial Independency

Bedouin women used to do knitting, sewing traditional clothes and making dairy products to sell in villages and towns. This was mentioned in several stories (Nora, Roqaya, Eda and Safiya) and in travellers' dairies (see: Burkhardt, 1822; Dixon, 1949).

'From time to time, women go together to the nearest town to sell their products' Roqaya said. Hessa also said that her mother, who lived in a village, told her that when Bedouins settle nearby, their women visited the village to sell their goods: 'They were good negotiators and they handled all their trade by themselves; we w ere astonished by their strength and cleverness'.

Edda and Roqaya (participants) mentioned that they used to make some dairy products and wool yarns and go with other women every few days to the nearby villages to sell them in exchange for coffee, rice and flour
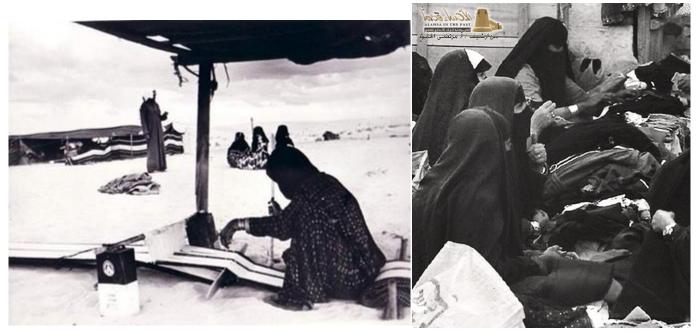

Figure 6: A Bedouin woman knitting the fabric called Sado

Figure 7: Bedouin women selling their goods in Al-Ahsaa

Moreover, it was common that they had their own property of horses, camels and herds of sheep, and that they rode their animals with high skill. Nora said that her mother was living alone in a house she owned when she reached her and Safiya's mother built a house by herself and lived there alone with her daughters. Both of them mentioned that their mothers had owned sheep and camels. Mezna, who was a villager mentioned that her mother was a wealthy women and owned farms, houses and did some trade.

Another point to mention, is that women had the right to inherit proprieties and money. Although certainly there were the exceptions of men taking control of their inheritance, the data in the stories regarding inheritance was positive. For example, Mezna described how her mother inherited a fortune after her father's death. Mezna herself did inherit some farms and a large amount of money after

the death of her second husband, although she lost them due to her trust in an agent. Her mother told her that she deserves it because she did not take care of her properties by herself; 'nothing can scratch your skin like your nail!' she blamed her.

In villages, generally, women had fewer opportunities to work. 'Women in villages had different circumstances, you can't generalize' said Mezna. However, they also worked in sewing and selling goods. When their husbands travelled to other countries to work, they had more opportunity or space to work. For instance, Hessa described how her mother took control of the household budget when her husband moved to work in Kuwait. She took care of the cow and she bought some sheep. She used to make yogurt and sell it. They had a better life financially after she took control of the income that her husband sent her.

In general, the data collected in this research shows a slightly variant space for work for women in the culture of that era. Women's opportunity was wider in the Bedouin and southern communities yet the opportunity narrows down in the villages and towns.

3.1.3 Marriage and Divorce

In the Bedouin tribal traditions, women were expected to marry their cousins from their father's side. It is obvious through the stories, except Eda's, that women did not have the choice to choose their husbands in their first marriage. Moreover, unless he was a cousin or a tribe member that she knew, the bride may not see her husbands before marriage.

The obedient behaviour of women at that time should not be taken away from the social context and tribal traditions where even men had to obey their fathers

or their tribal leaders even in personal decisions such as marriage. Dixon (1949) mentioned that not only women but even men expect their parents to find them a mate when reaching the age of manhood (p.140).

Melha explained how it depends on the girl's character, her family's circumstances and the economic situation:

> *It is difficult to say that something was common. It depended on the woman herself my dear. If she was strong she could refuse any proposed man, if she was young, weak, or an orphan, she probably would fear to refuse and disobey her parents or guardian.*

> *Also, it depended on the girl's family and their economic situation. At famine time, there is no choice. Spoiled girls of wealthy families have more choices, in contrast to the poor ones. At that time, they did not see it as forcing but a strategy to survive: everyone is just trying to find a supporter to feed his daughter. No time to make choices. It was a hunger time my dear; people were literally dying of hunger.*

All the interviewed Bedouin women asserted that their parents did not ask them for their opinion in their first marriage. However, after divorce they had the right to make their own decision in their marriage.

Nora also stated that 'girls usually were not asked for their opinion in marriage especially when they were orphans like me'. The interviewees agreed that only young girls were forced to marry, yet widows and divorced women can make their own choices and no one may force them.

However, they had the right to ask for divorce, and it was so common as they mentioned. This was also noticed by several travellers such as, Burckhardt (1830)

and Dixon (1949). Dixon even mentioned that when a married woman fell in love with another man she might tell her husband the whole truth and ask him to divorce her; 'This happens fairly often' he stated (p.58).

The stories of Nora, Melha and Safiya (participants) show how the culture was not strict about the decision of divorce neither about the refusal of a proposal. These results are supported by the observations of Dixon (1949). He emphasized that divorce was very simple among Bedouins and is not regarded, in any sense, as a matter of shame for either the man or woman. Furthermore, no disgrace attaches to the woman, who takes the matter quite philosophically, and proceeds to look for another husband (p.143). Moreover, Melha stated that the divorced woman was more desired and proposed by men and is known as *Ayof*, which is a term that means a stubborn who refused/divorced her husband, and indicates a strong personality.

In contrast, women's will in villages was more disregarded in their choice of marriages. This was clear in the stories of Modhi, Mezna and Amra who knew nothing about their husbands till the day of wedding, and divorce was more difficult than in the Bedouin society.

The relationship between the married couples in the stories were noteworthy. Most of interviewees stated that their parents had respectful and peaceful relations. For example, Melha and Eda stated that their parents' relationship was harmonious and passionate. Hessa talked about the relationship of her parents, who were married in this era:

> *They treated each other in a very lovely kindly way even though they were uneducated simple villagers. […] I don't ever remember that my dad*

yelled once at my mother. When my mother went to work in the afternoon, he took care of us and he spent time telling stories and teaching us interesting things. He taught me to read and write from an early age; he also taught me how to bake the bread; he was an expert baker.

However, other interviewee stated some issues. Safiya (participant) stated that her mother fled to her tribe when her husband married another woman who he was in love with. Nora also stated that her mother had a difficult life with her passed husband, who was twenty years older than her. Nevertheless, all the issues mentioned in the stories do not include abusing or oppression.

Figure 8: A photo of a Bedouin couple by Bell, 1914

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

Figure 9: Shaik Harb of Hwaitat tribe, his wife and son Qasim, 1914

However, even though they were under the dominance of men and their will in their marriage was ignored, women had in return some space of freedom in the context of that historical time. Divorce, inheritance, ability to own properties were privileges that women enjoyed at that era. Despite the poverty and the fact that there was no state or authorities to rule, there was no prostitution or crimes of rape know in that period of time (Dickson, 1959). Women were protected through the rules of desert even in war time.

3.2 The Age of the State: from Dessert to City (1930s to 1960s)

The emergence of the state of Saudi started with the capture of Riyadh by King Abdulaziz in 1902, but the final unification of all the regions, was not announced until 1932. Since 1913, King Abdulaziz started the project of Bedouins settlement. In some regions, small settlements were built to settle them as soon as possible for more control and to prepare them for living in cities.

In the Bedouin culture, tribal traditions have high authority; they control the social life. The nomadic society with its autonomy tribal system, and travelling unstable

nature faced a challenge to adopt with the new state with its civic laws and system that surpass the tribal authorities and traditions.

The project of Bedouins' settlement aimed to turn the nomads gradually from their tribal itinerant nature into settled citizens. In the culture of the Bedouins it is a shame or indignity to settle in an urban area as it was seen as a scarification of their freedom, strength and tribal autonomy. Therefore, instead of forcing them to move directly to the cities, the government built them settlements in their own lands. Every tribe or clan had, its own land, its autonomy and its own chief. Each settlement contained a school, a mosque, clinic and small houses, and they were encouraged to sell their camels; their connection to the desert and their transportation to travel there. The first settlement was built in 1913 (Al-Abdullah, 1999, p.554), thereafter more than 200 settlements were built all around the country (Abu-Aliah, 1977).

A few years later, the Bedouin people were moved to cities, either from settlements or directly from their camps in the desert. The movement of millions of people from desert to cities was not easy for these people. They found themselves suddenly out of their lands, their natural environment, their animals, their social system, their heritage
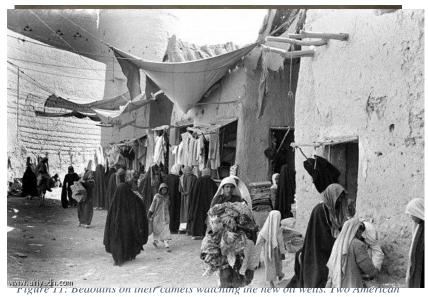

Figure 11: Bedouins on their camels watching the new oil wells. Two American
Figure 10: A street in a village

and their relational patterns. Bedouin people faced the cultural shock and felt the gap, the feeling of fear and abandonment drove them back to their traditions and to reject the integration with the new society that was taking its first steps toward modernity.

3.2.1 Roles in Private and Public Spheres:

According to the majority of the participants' stories, the roles generally remained traditional at that time. However, moving and settling had dissimilar effects on women depending on what environment they came from.

Bedouin women found living in the cities a boundary to their freedom and a strict limit to the roles they could practice when they were in their tribes. They moved from a community were private and public spheres were opened. From a close-knit community were women used to practice several active roles that were common for both genders such as shepherding, camel herding, watering, setting the camp up/off, slaughtering animals and welcoming guests that involved decision making. Yet, they suddenly found themselves in a new strange society in small houses with closed doors.

Another aspect is that, they faced the reality that they found themselves between foreigners for the first time. In the Bedouin culture and their heritage, a foreigner is a suspected enemy until he shows the opposite. Moving into cities, they faced the fact that they were foreign people, who were considered savages. This was a difficult shock for them that prevented them from integrating in this new society.

The impact was doubled for women who found themselves with no available work to do in the cities where most of the available jobs in that era were for men, due to their nature: construction, military and petroleum companies. The

transformation of roles was dramatic for Bedouin women as they found themselves trapped and disabled in the new houses and the modern environment. 'I was afraid to go anywhere' Roqaya expressed, and when fear comes, weakness does also.

For villager women, the city was also a source of fear, particularly in the beginning. Mezna described that precisely: 'I was isolated in this new city. [..] Briefly, I felt lost and vulnerable just like the country rat in the story'. From another side, it was a privilege, since they could get rid of the strict social constraints of their societies in the villages. They found a space for freedom and different roles to practice. In her story, Mezna did some business and she went to the market/Bazar and bought and sold goods.

So, in general the space of women's roles started to narrow for Bedouin women, and widen a bit for those from villages. Women had less access to the outside due to the cultural shock, absence of social communities and lack of jobs. However, there were still a space for practicing small businesses between houses and in Bazars.

3.2.2 Work and Financial Independency:

In most of the stories, they mentioned that they did try to work during their first years of arrival. Nora (participant) bought a sewing machine to sew dresses:

I bought an expensive Singer-brand black one. I sewed some dresses and I decorated them with colourful needlework. They were so beautiful. I spent a lot of time and effort on each piece. I sold some in the first years but unfortunately, they didn't pay back later. […]

Mezna (participant) also made a good business in the first few years. She had a clothes' renewing trade project. Everything was maintained by her. She mentioned that she 'had a good profit from this business for several years'. She also helped a relative to start her own business. Likewise, Hessa's mother used to work as a street vendor after they moved to Riyadh. She had a mobile booth, she worked also as a tailor and sometimes she made cream or yogurt to sell them. 'She made good money. I can say that she helped to raise our economic level from poor to middle class' she said.

Away from the lack of appropriate jobs, there were some financial opportunities in that era. Some women took advantage of the opportunities whilst others just isolated themselves. Another point worth mentioning, is that the nature of the available jobs created a male-oriented job environment. 'What jobs do you mean? All jobs were for men only' Melha said.

Moreover, women, particularly Bedouin, were forced gradually by the nature of cities to give up their properties of sheep and camels (could be evidenced in stories of Melha, Nora, Nora's neighbour and Hessa's mother). As a result, they turned more dependent on their husbands and their husbands' income.

3.2.3 Marriage and Divorce:

The marriage strategy was generally the same in that era. Still the parents were taking the decision for their children. No difference was notice through the stories. However, while far away from their parents, most of the Bedouin women found it difficult to run away and ask for divorce due to the nature of the city. Most of the women in the stories did not see their parents ever after going to the cities.

Besides which, the communication was very difficult; moving from an environment where communication was basically face-to-face, to far cities where communication needs education, knowledge and transportation. Women were cut off from their families. That absence of their families' support had an effect on the ease of going through the process of divorce.

In conclusion, this era was confusing for women. They moved suddenly from one environment to another; from desert tents to new cities. They found themselves separated from their families, friends and relatives. They had no skills to cope with these cities. For villager women, there was an improvement, while for Bedouin women the cultural norms and expectations were tightening against them as women. They were gradually prevented from the advantages of the desert life. Their lack of knowledge and social skills, the shortage of jobs, the nature of the city's design, produces a new scheme of culture. A new culture was forming and it developed dramatically in the next era.

3.3 The Oil Boom: The Shock of the Wealth: (1970s-1980s)

Despite the fact that oil was discovered in Saudi since 1938, it did not affect the economy notably until the 1970s (Peterson, 1991; Khalifa, 2001). At the first decades, British and American oil companies had the right to exploit oil for minimal payment or taxes for the kingdom (Peterson, 1991, p.1447). Hence, the Saudi national income had not benefited from oil until the 1970s when the government started to share the returns of oil with the American company Aramco, and the emergence of OPEC leveraged the prices of oil.

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

At that time, the economic boom stroke; the national income flew high, many job opportunities were available, and wages were highly increased. This sudden extraordinary increase in the individuals' income affected the society in several ways (Khalifa, 2001). People were emigrating from their rural sides or desert camps toward the new cities. Their lifestyles were turned around dramatically into modernized comfortable lives, land grants and loans for citizens, high incomes, free education, free medical services and social insurance. The development encompassed establishing universities, airports and industrial cities. The cities were built in a modernized style. The situation of stability and wealth strengthened people's trust in their new government. They were more accepting to the change at that time.

There were four major features of this era: 1) the wealth; 2) education, 3) the openness in policies and society; and 4) the dramatic change in the architectural style of cities. Access to education increased with the spread of formal schools all around the kingdom (illiteracy rate was 85% at that time (Beranek, 2009)). The openness of the society could be notably observed in both the policies and the culture of people at that time.

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

Figure 12: An advertisement of Saudi Airlines in 1960s

Figure 13: A cover of the official magazine of Saudi Airlines in the 1960s

3.3.1 Roles in Private and Public Spheres:

This era was the era of wealth, education and opportunities for women. However, the availability of opportunities does not necessarily imply accessibility. The opportunities were there; yet the question is who could access them?

The government policy at that time was to develop the illiterate society. Women were not merely given the chance to study and work but they were *encouraged* to through social campaigns and awards. However, they had different responses toward this empowerment policy according to their social or economic status.

From one side, the minority women from wealthy educated families were leveraged; they had the opportunity to study in universities, had sponsorships to study abroad, work and gain high positions, applied for business support loans and started their own business. They gained more empowerment and support and built

their career. 'It was a golden age for us' Salwa Shaker, the Saudi Television presenter said about it.

Figure 14:A number of Saudi women being trained on sewing, healthcare and social skills, 1969

However, women from uneducated and poor economic situation had less benefit of this era. They did not have enough knowledge and did not gain support from their families and surroundings to change their lifestyles, educate themselves or work. Actually, they turned into more traditional roles than ever, isolated at home having repeated childbearing and gossiping with relatives. There were no jobs that suited their law qualifications and no transportation to help them communicate with others. Al-Obaid (participant) expressed the effect of this era:

The Oil boom was a unique turn point in the history of Saudi culture. It has affected women in two different directions: in the groups or families who accepted the change, women were highly empowered and actually they still have this empowerment today. While in groups who resisted the change at that time, women are still suffering disempowerment.

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

The oil boom era was symbolically a gate leading out the dominant culture, a gate that had opened temporarily then closed. Those who went through it escaped and those who hesitated remained trapped inside.

In the stories, most of the women from the older generation tried to pursue their study in the adults' literacy school but they did not complete their education due to lack of ambition and the feeling of non-worthiness. The girls' schools started in the 1950s but did not spread widely until the oil boom in the 1970s. There was a hesitation about the girls' formal schools, however, all of the women in the stories took their daughters to schools in that era. It was noticeable in all the stories that the generation of that era did not face strict resistance from their husbands or fathers.

In Hessa's story (participant), her father hesitated to register her in school at the beginning, yet when she insisted, he asked her uncle to register her. He bought her all her tools and permitted her to go, still he could not get rid of the old norms that was still rooted inside him; he could not go with her to the school by himself. His attitude reflects how the perceptions were changing in a dramatic way that some people could not bear, yet they know it is for their good. The same father insisted later that his son-in-law never prevents his daughter from her education or work.

According to the stories, the roles did not develop for the first generation of migrants to the cities. Even though most of the interviewees tried to study in Adult schools, they gave up. Hence, they did not experience an advantage. That gives an indication that the discourse of women empowerment in that era, which was targeting the elite women, did not benefit the majority of women: the uneducated.

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

The young generation of the oil boom were the first to study and get the advantage of education and jobs opportunities, however, this generation was still young and did not participate in the society's development yet.

A very small percentage of women who had the privilege to study before this era (the elite that studied at private school for girls) were the ones who benefitted the most. They had access to new fields such as television, newspapers, art and high education. Some of them had high positions in the ministry of media, the ministry of foreign affairs, universities and the Aramco oil company.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Saudi women appeared as introducers in the national Radio and Television, and in the 1980s they were the head of some production departments in the national radio, and there were Saudi female directors (Al-Akil, 2010, p.60-61).

That was about the elite who were educated and came mostly from liberal families, however, mainstream women went through three correlating social phenomena that affected their roles and their perception of themselves. These are: the increasing interest in showing off jewellery, the recruitment of housemaid labour and the repeat childbearing.

Apparently, women were enjoying this era where they had the luxury of large villas, house servants and fancy goods available. However, the situation of comfort affected them negatively as they found themselves without any need, nor any chance to work or to take roles in the society.
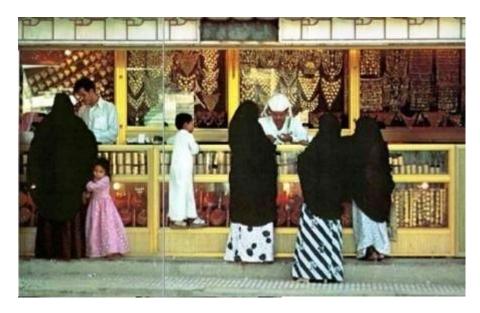
Figure 15:Women buying from a gold jewellery shop in Riyadh in the 1980s

The wealth from the oil-boom turned the interest of the majority of middle-class women into jewelleries, luxuries and ostentation. This was clear through the story of Hessa. The wealth and availability of housemaids was a reason to have more children; 'You have a maid now; you have to have more children' Hessa's mother kept saying to her. Hessa explained her reason for having more children at that time, in a precise way:

> [I]t was like a competition! At that time, the only thing we had to show off and boast about was two things: children and gold!

> [I]t was a source of pride and self-importance when a woman showed her jewels. The other thing that gave her pride was the number of her children! [...]

> I went with the flow.

Likewise, it was demonstrated through the story of Hiyam about her mother:

> She got pregnant again. All of us were shocked but she said that she has to prove to her haters (some women who were her relatives and neighbours) that she was still young and has a successful marriage. Repeated childbearing was a sign of fertility and femininity in

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

> *women's perception at that time. [...] I wonder how a smart woman*
> *like mum turned to thinking like that.*

In the time of sudden wealth and with no access to work with their low-education, women had nothing to do other than giving birth and show off their jewelleries between themselves. However, even though there were many motivations offered from the government to convince women to study and work, they lacked personal motivation that pursue them to get into the field of work. This can be seen through most of the stories of pre-oil boom generation.

Any woman who studied at college would get a monthly allowance from the government, any woman who graduated from college would receive a financial award and she had the chance to choose any work opportunity that suited her in any place she selected (mostly the jobs were school teachers, nurses, clerks and employees in some public organizations).

This abundance of wealth affected women, particularly the middle-class, crucially as it made them less needy to work and this has normalized a stereotypical image of the fortunate woman as a rich house-wife who is served by servants.

This marginalization of uneducated women drove them to focus on ostentation by purchasing and showing their gold jewellery, as the anthropologist Al-Khateeb mentioned in her book (Al-Khateeb, 1998b.). Women used gold at that time as a symbol of the social status that they lacked. Gradually, consumerism was starting to blow up in the society.

Women became more dependent on men, compared to their mothers and grandmothers. This dramatic change in life styles, did not just affect women, but

further, it affected the perception of women's role in the society in the mentality of young generations at that time.

In conclusion, the effect of the oil-boom could not be considered a linear or one-directional dynamic. It has affected women at different levels or volumes depending on their economic, geographical or social groups. Elite women were leveraged; educated Saudi women at that time were encouraged to work in journalism, national television and radio. It is obvious that those who got the benefit from this opportunity were mostly from wealthy, educated families or from non-tribal origins.

Women who had no obligation to their tribes and had supportive educated families with liberal background, had the courage to enter these fields and they achieved high levels of success. For example: Lutfia Al-Khateeb worked as an editor since 1958 and Shams Kuzandar started writing as an editor in Al-Yamamh magazine in 1964 and she wrote the editorial page several times. Dunia Bakr-Yunis introduced her first program on TV in 1965[3] and she was well known for her popular children program. Dunia made interviews with princes, ministers and high senior officials at that time. Salwa Shaker was an introducer in national Radio and national TV, and took her role as an actor in several TV dramas in the national TV since 1965[4]. The denominator was that they had supportive educated liberal educated families and they were mostly from non-tribal origins.

According to her interview on Al-Khalejia channel [3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JohQp78WB2Y

According to her interview in Al-Thaqafia channel https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxhd-[4] g6qZnk

By contrast, poor and uneducated women were denied the benefits of that era because of their low qualification and the inaccessibility to these opportunities. Even though women were entitled to receive financial benefits, that had to be through their male-guardian (Doumato, 1992) and these women did not have the knowledge to apply neither the ability to transport to organizations. Hence, poor and uneducated women were not able easily to obtain government assistance, such as livestock subsidies, or to apply for loans to purchase land or housing. That affected these women intensely, it 'bolster[ed] women's economic dependence on men, and re-inscrib[ed] in the new modernized society the values of patriarchal privilege within the family' (Doumato, 1992, p.40).

3.3.2 Work and Financial Independency:

The rise of national income in that era caused a massive jump in imports. New type of goods and markets were available. The old-style goods were not in demand and the bazars where uneducated women could sell their goods easily were closed in favour of new shopping malls. Moreover, tens of thousands of foreign workers were recruited. Mezna and Nora (participants) expressed the creep of the civilization, materialism and consumerism:

> *The old bazar, where any one can put a rug and sell his goods, was closed and new markets with modern stores were opened. Selling became more difficult. […] I stopped.*

(Mezna, participant)

Figure 16: One of the first shopping centers in Riyadh, 1983

I bought an expensive Singer black [sewing machine]. I sewed some dresses. I decorated them with colourful needlework. [...]. I spent a lot of time and effort on each piece. I sold some in the first years but unfortunately, they didn't pay off later. [...] People preferred to buy imported clothes; they were more modern and cheaper.

(Nora, participant)

The job opportunities for women in that era was massive. The development led to job creation in many fields such as education, health and media. However, the majority of educated Saudi women were directed towards the teaching jobs due to their preference to gender-segregated environment in schools. Only a minority were directed to medicine, marketing or media jobs due to the challenging nature of these jobs, and the refusal of their families.

The government business funding loans were available for women, however, again only elite women had the opportunity to apply for them due to the skills and qualifications needed for these loans. Many of them started their own business

such as boutiques, hair salons, tailoring services, restaurants and fewer started other types of business such as import trade companies.

3.3.3 Marriage and Divorce:

Marriage was still arranged in a traditional way. However, there was a slight change regarding women's decision in their marriage. This was obvious in the stories of Hessa and Hiyam when their fathers asked them for their opinion. No other apparent change was noticed, except that most of the generation of that era decided to give their daughters in the future more chance to choose their spouses.

A noticeable matter in the frame of marriage is the repeat childbearing. It was apparent through the stories of Hessa and Hiyam's mother. The repeated childbearing had its effect on the marriages in the stories. What could be obtained from the stories is that the childbearing was not a result of the pressure from their men, rather it was a desire of women themselves in the stories. It was as a result of the marginalization of their participation in the new society and their lack of achievement.

Overall, the oil boom had a massive impact on the society, particularly on women. Nevertheless, it is illogical to imagine its effect as a one-sided factor, or to generalize its effect on all women in the same way. The effect of the economic oil boom was positive in some respects on certain groups or classes, yet negative in respect to others. Some women started to work, participate in some fields, but simultaneously, the middle and lower-class women were dismissed from participating in the wheel of development for several reasons as discussed above. Moreover, a negative stereotype of women was constructed and spread between women in correlation with the emergence of consumerism. Later, the stage of oil-boom declined dramatically in the 1990s.

3.4 The Epoch of 'Sahwa': (mid 1980s – 2001)

In the mid-1980s, a major exceptional phenomenon was emerging which would change the face of Saudi society. It was the rise of the Islamic fundamental movement *Sahwa*. Literally, Sahwa in Arabic means 'Awakening' as it was seen by its followers as a movement of the awakening or strengthening of the Islamic identity. The *Sahwa* is a unique situation that cannot be described merely as a religious movement. The Saudi theoretician and criticism academic Abdullah Al-Ghathami described this phenomenon as a cultural situation, a pattern of thinking or a way of perceiving the world.[5]

At the beginning, the movement failed to obtain support from society. However, a few years later, in the 1980s, the movement norms were spread again during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The discourse of the *Sahwa* movement was highly emotional and influenced Saudi society at that time. The atmosphere was fraught with fears over religion, and the mainstream people were fuelled with anger and felt more defensive against any outsiders. Fear made people more adherent to their religion, and the movement offered an extreme understanding of religiosity for both men and women. As a result, stricter cultural rules were spread among the people, including those regarding women and their mobility, dress code and participation in public life.

The radical norms spread remarkably and affected social life; although they were not applied officially, they were spread and adopted by the public. The phenomenon

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[5] In his interview https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnRZQYowzx0

was so influential that it did not need official rules, the vales were absorbed by the majority of society and applied strictly by the religious police (Al-Haia'a).

During the 1980s, the spread of Sahwa was in the intellectual-ideological level, however, the actual start of the intensive uprising of the Sahwa was in 1990 during the Iraqi invasion to Kuwait, when the government had to call on foreign armies (chiefly American) to protect its territory against the possible Iraqi attack (Lacroix, 2011, p.2). The feeling of fear led people to adhere their religious identity. This was described precisely through the story of Samya (participant).

The arrival of the American troops provoked an intense controversy among Saudis. At that time only, the society realized that it was divided into conservative and liberal trends. The announcement of the arrival of non-Muslim forces in the Land of the Two Holiest Places fostered the rise of a campaign against this action by the main social-figures of the *Sahwa* movement, and the campaign turned into protests in many regions of the kingdom (Lacroix, p.3). The growing presence of the foreign militaries inflamed a huge anger that affected the society for years, according to Samya (participant, 39).

> *[...] We saw the American soldiers with their full armed uniforms hanging out everywhere in Riyadh, in malls, streets, hotels and restaurants; it was as if our country had been invaded. [...] The 1990s were the years of anxiety, worry and silent growing anger.*

Figure 17: American soldiers in Safeway supermarket, Al-Khubar, 1993.

When the Islamist opponents started to protest in 1990, the patience of the government was reaching its end. The government faced the protests and many of the Sahwa's Islamic figures were arrested. For the first time in the history of Saudi, the media started to criticize the *Sahwa* movement (Lacroix, p.159).

Even though, the political 'divorce' between the government and the religious trend in the society started in 1990, the national policies, particularly regarding women, were subject to the heavy public pressure of the *Sahwa* movement until the late 1990s. However, since the mid-1990s, the Sahwa stopped attracting youth, which means that it has stopped transmitting to the new generations (Al-Ghathami, 2015).

3.4.1 Roles in Private and Public Spheres:

During this era, the most essential feature regarding women was the spread of the Sahwa's new discourse that 'patronised' mainstream women in the society. After the ignorance of their role in previous eras, this discourse attracted women, particularly conservative middle-class, and gave them sense of importance.

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

It should be emphasised that the mainstream women absorbed the norms of Sahwa and propagandised them; they were not negative victims as a reader could reckon, actually, women played a major role distributing the Sahwa's extreme norms among the society. Women's enthusiasm to take a crucial role in the Sahwa could be explained by their need to take a role in society and feeling the need to belong to something important after decades of being abandoned from the development of their country. They needed to legitimatise their absence from the public sphere and to visualise themselves as patriots.

The Sahwa's enthusiastic discourse attracted youth more than any other group. This is demonstrated in the study of Al-Khateeb (1998 a). The study conducted in 1998 indicated that younger women (under 25) have more extreme perceptions about gender-equality than older women did. All the participants under 25 in the study confirmed that they did not support gender-equality, while the older participants (who were not raised by the discourse of Sahwa) had a slightly less strict attitude (see the data of Al-Khateeb, 1998a., p.129).

The Sahwa constructed a gender ideology by promoting a stereotypical image that could be called the 'Ideal Muslim women' (Doumato, 1992). This 'ideal' women image was radically negative from several aspects: to be obedient to her guardian, not to communicate with any male and to be isolated in her home. The image of the ideal woman was to be 'invisible' in all aspects of life, the Hijab was no more a sign of modest identity but a way for invisibility. Women were not allowed to be seen or heard in any place were men are presented. Her actions, appearance, voice, and walking was a subject for judgments. Even the mention of

a woman's name in public was considered an embarrassing 'visibility' of the woman.

The image of 'ideal woman' was 'polished' in the discourse to be adopted by women. It was crystallized in the usage of idioms like 'the queen' or 'the precious/hidden pearl' in public speech, books and flyers used widely at that time. The majority of women adopted this discourse and started to re-promote it by themselves.

Le Renard (2010) argued that the appropriation of this discourse by Saudi women, from different social groups, helped bring a sense of autonomy for them in their own spheres, after their exclusion from public spheres in the oil-boom era. For example, 'in the early 1990s, some women began to express their ideas in religious terms and some did establish and manage religious institutions of their own, with some becoming respected preachers along the way. These female 'preachers' spreading Islam (e.g., by delivering neighbourhood lessons or lectures in schools or colleges) found a sort of empowerment through the trend of Sahwa, the matter that they never practice before (Le Renard, 2010, p.4) in the oil-boom era. This gave women the feeling that they were involved in this mass-crowd or the collective entity of Sahwa. Apparently, it gave them reasonable grounds for being under men's dominance in the society. It was an approach to 'legitimatise' their lack of rights; a reaction for being 'objectified'. Hence, they stood up for this discourse to show that this is their choice, even though they had no other choice.

Besides, despite the fact that gender-segregated spheres are convenient for Muslim women in general, due to the Hijab that she can take off in these spheres, for Middle-class women, the new gender-segregated spheres represented free and

private spaces for them, to act away from the control or supervision of men. In the new gender-segregated spheres, they found a space to organize charity, lectures, activities, voluntary work and entertainment gatherings. They found spaces that they could control by themselves, with a sense of autonomy as Le Renard (2010) described. Hence, although Sahwa was a decline in women's rights, it had their own support due to the historical and social context in that era. It provided some women with what they were striving for: roles and sense of importance, and the Sahwa's filled this gap by emphasizing the idea of the 'heroism' of the woman in its rhetoric. Samya (participant, 39) exemplified that in her story:

> *Unlike what others may think, although the Sahwa delayed women's rights, I can't deny that it did give us, as women, many aspects of strength. We felt that we were on a great mission: rebels for our Islam. I remember that, I turned from a shy girl to a strong and confident one that had the strength to deliver public speeches among my mates in school or college. I used to preach to my older relatives with high self-confidence.*

At the same time, liberal women who had their education abroad in the 1960s and 1970s found the Sahwa as an enormous barrier that smashed their dreams of women rights and civil society. Women's attitudes in the society were growing in two parallel lines in opposite directions that would not meet. However, the Sahwa was considerably sweeping the society.

This era seems to be the most extreme against women's rights; it represents the peak of the crisis; since then, the situation has started to shift, even if slowly, in favour of women. The 1980s and the 1990s were the worst decades for Saudi women.

3.4.2 Work and Financial Independence:

The main two factors that affected women's access to workspace at that time were the low economy after the gulf war and the Sahwa powerful extreme discourse. The 1990s oil price shock occurred in response to the war alongside the high expenses of the American troops stationed burdened the national budget and affected the society harshly. Government job opportunities, particularly for women, intensely declined. The rate of unemployment was at its highest numbers. There were no official polls, but there are estimates that 90% of the females in Saudi Arabia were unemployed in that era.[6]

Although the discourse of Sahwa did not oppose the work for women, it gave greater value to the woman's role as a mother and wife. That gave some women an excuse to stay at home. Moreover, it put strict conditions on the ideal Muslim woman's job environment that should be gender-segregated. That led to a public reluctance to work in mixed or semi-mixed spheres such as hospitals, banks and companies. The private sector, who was less attractive to women due to its long hours and mostly mixed-gendered environment, had to import labour. That complicated the situation as a high percentage of young educated women were unemployed and further away from any training experience of work.

The difficulty of transportation in the expanding cities made the situation even worse for women. With the lack of income, inability to move and the 'legitimacy' of their obedience to their husbands or fathers, women became more dependant.

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[6] AlOwaishiq, Abdulaziz, Alwatan Online, 14, May, 2012, www.alwatan.com.sa/Articles/Detail.aspx?ArticleId=16713.

Hiyam (participant, 40) mentioned this period of the late nineties after her graduation when her husband refused to let her work for five years.

3.4.3 Marriage and Divorce:

Regarding marriage, Sahwa had its negatives and some positives. One of its positives is that it stood against forcing women to marriage. This could be seen in Hiyam's story (participant) about her second marriages and how the change of culture affected her parents' attitude about her choice.

From another side, modernity has complicated the process of divorce. Divorce is no more a religious practice that only needs two witnesses to be confirmed, rather in the modern society it is a civic matter that means visiting the court, appointments, lawyers and settlements. Uneducated women with no experience, income and ability to move, found the process extremely complicated. That led to a deterioration in women's situation.

What made the situation worse is that the laws of divorce and custody were not clear and sophisticated. They were left to the interpretation and judgment of the male judges. That led to more injustice particularly with poor women with low education. Additionally, there was no organization to protect abused women.

3.5 The Events of 9/11 and the Decline of the Sahwa: The Reforming Age: (2001 – 2010) The Decline of Sahwa:

In 2000, the influence of the Sahwa was gradually decreasing. This could be referenced to several reasons, First, is that the generation that was born in the late 1980s onwards were not raised by the discourse of Sahwa after the restrictions on its activities and on its figures' access to media and education since 1990. Second, the

emergence of the Internet and the entrance of satellite TV and the internet since the late 1990s and spread after 2000. Third, King Abdullah scholarship programme to send students to study abroad, which started in 2006 gave a considerable part of the conservative society a chance to contact others outside their society.

The Reform Project: A Promise of a New Era for Women:

After 9/11, Saudi Arabia started a reform project after realising the risk of the radical trends that could develop in society. The reform project started with the signing of the UN CEDAW. Although Saudi Arabia expressed its reservations regarding articles in the convention and stated that 'In case of contradiction between any term of the Convention and the norms of Islamic law, the kingdom is not under obligation to observe the contradictory terms of the Convention' (El-Masri, 2012, p.940), the act was considered courageous progress and a sign of a 'greater adherence to the internationally recognised human rights standard' (Alwasil, 2010, p.1072).

However, the remaining effects of the Sahwa were still deeply rooted in society, and the national ratification of CEDAW provoked controversial and furious responses. In 2003, Saudi Arabia faced a series of bombings in several sites as an insurrection against the new opening discourse. To face the violence, the government started to produce a discourse of fighting against the 'deviants', 'terrorism' and 'extremism', while promoting the notions of 'reformism', 'moderation', 'tolerance' and 'the culture of dialogue'. Terms of 'women's empowerment' and 'women rights' were for the first time in Saudi a part of this new discourse (Le Renard, 2010).

These changes were not easy; they encountered broad resistance and opposition from the conservative public. However, in general, even though they encountered a

concrete conservative resistance, women's rights in Saudi Arabia were progressing in this period, and women became more empowered since 2001.

3.5.1 Roles in Private and Public Spheres:

The government continued giving women more rights in gradual, careful steps to avoid violence and public resistance, even though it could not avoid the anger that led to the bombing of 2003. Women were given citizenship cards for the first time in 2002; in 2008, they were able to apply for the card without the 'permission' of their male-guardian (Doumato, 2010, p.4). In 2004, the National Dialogue Conference on Women, launched by then-Crown Prince Abdullah, recommended that women be allowed to sit as judges in family courts and that family law be standardised to avoid the arbitrary opinions of male judges. That conference sparked change in the judicial system.

Moreover, in 2005, a plan was announced to set up 17 technical colleges in different regions of the country to prepare women for the labour market. In 2007, the government announced plans to set aside a third of all jobs in the market for Saudi women. In 2013, Saudi women were allowed to join the Consultative Council for the first time and were appointed a fifth of the seats.

3.5.2 Work and Financial Independency:

The economic situation started to decline and living standards have declined in real terms, per capita gross domestic product (GDP) has fallen, from about $18,000 in 1980 to about $8,000 in 2004 (Lidstone, 2005, p. 50 cited in: Profanter, et al, 2014, p.31). In 2006, Saudi Arabia was shocked with the greatest economic crisis in its history; the collapse of its stock market. The growing population, rising

prices, decreasing income, shortage of work opportunities and the decline in the public health services, affected society and women intensively.

Women faced the demand to work and support their families in this economic situation. Due to signing CEDAW new occupations were offered for women. Moreover, the entrance of a high percentage of females into the labour force led them to realize the necessity for women to drive. The women's issues that were seen as needless in the age of oil boom because of the wealth and comfort, are now all visualized in a new way. The perception has changed considerably among a notable proportion of working women and their families. The public perception about women's work was getting more positive. Nevertheless, there is still an undeniable proportion that keep their traditional views regarding women's rights and roles. The conservatives see this change as a westernization of the society that should be resisted.

3.5.3 Marriage and Divorce:

Through the stories there is no indication of a distinct change in the process of marriage at this era. Marriage is still arranged through the families. However, a meeting is more common to be held and an engagement period before marriage.

3.6 Social Media: The New Public Spheres: (2011-)

This stage features two main attributes: the spread of social media and the approach of more open policies towards women. Although social media started spreading since 2004, it is apparent that 2011 was the year of the real distribution of social media in the Arab region generally and Saudi Arabia in particular. More people were attracted to the new social media particularly Twitter. The spread of social media as platform of

debate caused a shock in the mentality of people. They started to see each other lastly, talk more freely, debate more, about the conflict and contemplate.

For Saudi women, the year of 2011 brought progress to the lives of well-educated women. Women had taken seats in the Saudi Shura Council for the first time and they were granted the right to vote and run as candidates in the next local elections, which occurred in 2015. What was the essential advancement for middle-class women is the adjustment of the civil laws, and the new jobs opportunities offered for women.

3.6.1 Roles in Private and Public Spheres:

Through the stories, an obvious change could be noticed regarding the roles. Abeer and Lama (participants) are successful working women, and although Rana is still a student, she is a young businesswoman.

The only interviewee who had a negative attitude toward her role is Maryam (participant, 22). Although she claims that her attitude is her choice, still she mentions the dominance of her brothers in her life. She lives in an extended family house and her mother, as she describes, has a withdrawn personality. She explained her situation in a few words:

> *Well… it is remarkably getting better, no doubts. Many opportunities are offered nowadays, many strategies are changed, yet still, I think it all depends on the environment and the men in your family. I mean that it doesn't matter how many policies are changed or opportunities are offered if a woman can't for any reason reach these opportunities.*

Maryam represents the low-class women, who are unmotivated in their environment and have less access to work and outside relationships.

However, social media gave some women an opportunity to fulfil their potential and empower themselves. According to participants one of the major impacts is the online jobs that social media provided for women who were unable to work due to their circumstances or qualifications. For example, Wafa is a 33-year woman, mother of four, who works as a coordinator for several international brands' accounts on social media. When asked about how she sees the change of women's roles she explained how this opportunity helped her to gain confidence and strength in her roles inside and outside her home:

> *Surely there is a huge change. Only ten years ago, I wouldn't have imagined myself dealing with international companies' representative. My husband is now accepting my need to travel sometimes to attend meetings or workshops. Before, this would have been impossible.*

The experiment of Wafa indicates how her work in social networks did not only boost her self-esteem but it affected her role in private and public spheres.

3.6.2 Work and Financial Independence:

The social reform that took place in 2011 included opening new fields and opportunities for women to work. The new open fields, for minor jobs such as cashiers and receptionists, were treated with unwillingness or hesitation in the beginning, however, they turned into acceptable jobs in society after a few years.

The declining economy, the growth in unemployment rates, the women's need for income given the increased divorce rate, due to the facilitation of filing divorce cases, all these factors led into an unpredictable turnout of lower class women into these jobs.

Through the stories, it was clear how the perception toward women's work and financial independency has changed. Four of the five interviewees of the new

generation are working or planning to work. This is demonstrated in Abeer's (participant, 26) story about her friend:

> *I had a friend at school who kept telling me how strict and harsh her father was with them. But such people are mostly from very poor and uneducated families. [...] Their whole surrounding environment is very ignorant. Do you see what I mean? This friend took a health care diploma, and she worked as a doctor's assistant. She is financially independent now and she gives her mother money every month. Not only her character but even the character of her mother has changed as I noticed. [...] If she stayed uneducated and weak she would be the same as her mother.*

By contrast, even though Maryam (participant, 22) was from a similar environment., she could not override the obstacles in her own family to work. She claimed that it was her choice:

> *I wish to work but there are no available jobs for low qualifications except in hospitals, companies or as a cashier which I don't prefer. With my condition, I can't work in a long-hours or hard-work demanding job. In addition, in our Bedouin community girls can't work anywhere, she should respect her tribe's reputation and not work in a non-segregated environment. [...] So, working as a receptionist in hospitals or a cashier in a supermarket is not a choice at all.*
>
> *I know girls who did work regardless of their tribal traditions, but not me. At the moment, I stay with mum at home. I only read, cook, drink coffee and talk with her.*

Maryam (participant, 22) referred her decision not to work in the available jobs was to respect traditions, yet she admitted that there are girls who did break these barriers. Maryam was raised in a family where the character of the mother is

negative. The absence of her father and the control of her grandmother and later her brothers drove Maryam to feel her incapability as she stated.

The stories of Maryam (participant) and Lama (participant) and the different ways they responded to the social constraints, although they lived in similar communities and circumstances are very contradictory. The story of Maryam is an example of how regardless of the degree of education some women are unlikely to achieve their potential because they are obstructed by circumstances (e.g. traditions, work restrictions, family problems). Becoming educated did not imply that they overcome these barriers. Restrictions in their families might be applied by men or women. In the case of Maryam, despite the absence of her father, her mother gave control to the grandmother then to Maryam's brothers. However, the hardest barrier to Maryam as she states is the traditions and the fear of society's view.

However, the story of Abeer's (participant) friend who challenged the boundaries and got a job regardless of her family's reservations is an example of how, sometimes, the barriers are more emotional than tangible difficulties. These stories give indications of how these 'customs, social conventions, and judicial principles were flexible' (Le Renard, 2008, p.613) yet they demand great courage to overcome.

3.6.3 Marriage and divorce:

Marriage social procedure is still traditional. However, women's rights in marriage and divorce have developed remarkably. Since 2011, divorce and custody laws were adjusted. For example, the divorce procedure is facilitated, and the custody laws are adjusted in favour of mothers. These rights existed centuries

ago, yet they were entangled due to the complexities of modern courts. These complexities were solved through the recent reform of justice laws.

This improvement was reflected in the story of Lama's (participant, 24) divorce:

> *I went back to my family's house and I filed a lawsuit against him providing all the screenshots, photos and call records from his phone. The judge complimented me for the way I organized my evidence and documents, and he gave me divorce with compensation. However, I waived the compensation because I know he couldn't pay it and my relationship with his mother was good; I did not need it anyway. My mother and brother were so proud of me.*

This progress in women's attitude toward unfaithful or abusive husbands is related to two factors: the reforming adjustments to the laws of divorce and custody including the facilitation of the policies, and the development of the young women's character in recent time.

It is essential to discuss the progress in the freedom of movement in this era. Since 2011, several incidents occurred related to the freedom of movement. In May 2011, Manal Al-Sharif published a video of herself driving her car in Khubar. A day later she was arrested for the accusation of 'disrupting the system' but released only a few hours later because of the intervention of Human Rights Watch and the International Secretariat in London.

In 17th of June, tens of women drove their cars all around the kingdom and published their videos on YouTube. Only one was arrested for a few hours and released. In November 2013, another action was arranged. Again, tens of women drove their cars al around the kingdom and documented their driving. What was noticeable

in this protest is the participation of some middle-class conservative women. We saw women with full Hijab videoing themselves. Most were alone and some were with their sons or husbands next to them to support them.

Even though these actions did not affect the ban at that time, it has demonstrated the change in society and the culture itself. Almost all the younger generation interviewees showed their support to the idea, which is a development considering that until few years ago, the majority of Saudi women were not supporting the idea (see the results of Abdel-Raheem, 2013).

This shift could be related to several factors. Le Renard (2008) correlated the development of young women's aspirations to the context of widespread higher education and the diverse media available via satellite television and the Internet (p.626). One of the possible factors is the influence of social media, either through the debates in Twitter, or through the encouragement of the spreading videos on YouTube.

Another aspect regarding mobility in this stage is the emergence of car rental online applications such as Uber and Careem.7 These companies boosted the women's ability to go outside alone and manage their lives by themselves, particularly those from middle to lower classes who cannot afford a chauffeur and a care, to move independently. The stories of participant Lama, Rana and Nada indicate a development in their ability to move independently compared to previous eras.

In general, this is an auspicious period of time that is full of promises. Although the change is occurring slowly yet ceaselessly, the essential feature of this change is that

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7 The research was conducted in 2018 before allowing women equal right to drive.

it is mobilizing the culture not merely the policies. Which can lead to more ease in developing the policies without a social resistance.

4. Discussion:

This narrative has presented the cultural change regarding Saudi women through women's stories and ethnohistorical data. It has provided an insight about the development of the culture and demonstrated the complexity of factors that have affected the culture.

In the light of the results, it is an understatement to argue that it is shallow to refer to the culture regarding women as merely a result of traditions, religion, or policies. It is more complicated and correlated. Several factors have their influence and its reciprocal effect, that varies from time to time.

Women in the pre-unification stage, suffered from gender inferiority and oppression in a tribal hierarchal community. However, their situation varied between Bedouin and villagers. Bedouin women had more freedom of movement, right to divorce and flexibility in public and private roles than those in villages due to the open nature of the nomadic life in the desert.

In the age of the state, the sudden settlement into cities affected Bedouin women, limited their ability to move and to practice their daily roles such as shepherding and selling. Their disconnection from their families and the complication of the civil procedures of divorce made it a hard procedure for them. In contrast, women coming from villages found the city more revealing for them. They were detached from their small villages and communities and their strict traditions and social norms encouraged them to have more freedom of movement, comparatively. Generally, in this era, women tried doing some work outside of the home such as being a street-vendor, tailor or shepherding. The cities were tightening in on them yet still the culture was open. A minority of educated women of elite class, took

advantage of the openness policies and tolerant culture in this era; they obtained high positions in media, ministries and oil companies.

In the oil boom era, people moved to new large villas with modern architectural designs, and high wall-fences. The new designs of houses prevented neighbours from having strong relationships with their neighbours. The streets became busier with an increasing amount of traffic and the lack of public transportation made women's freedom of movement more difficult. The economic effect was prominent. The imported goods and new modern style malls affected the uneducated women's opportunities to work. Moreover, the increasing wealth from of the oil-boom turned the interest of the majority of middle-class women into luxuries and jewellery. In addition, the wealth and availability of housemaids was a reason to have repeated childbearing.

On the other side, education was spreading through official schools and adults' literacy schools. At the end of this stage, the first signs of Sahwa started spreading, and the gender segregation started to be enforced in public and private spaces. The Sahwa values were strict regarding the role of woman and the visibility of her character in society.

In 1990, the Sahwa reached its ultimate spreading among the society with the Gulf war. The arrival of American troops and their settlement between 1990 to 2003 provoked terrorism attacks and bombing that made the pressure of the extremist trend a serious threat, and drove the government to compromise and revise its policies to prevent provoking the conservative majority. More conservative policies were applied in the 1990s as a result of that tension.

The event of 9/11 represented a turning point in Saudi policies. The government that was facing the threat of terrorism since 1990, is now accused of terrorism and is forced to apply a more rigorous anti-terrorism strategy. Moreover, the event of 9/11 and the later

local bombings of 2003, decreased people's sympathy with Sahwa's extreme discourse. The reforming project that was launched in 2003 aimed to apply new open policies and particularly empowering women. The reforming project created more opportunities for women, changed many policies and laws and facilitated women's civil procedures such as issuing documents. Furthermore, Saudi women were assigned seats in the Saudi Shura Council for the first time and they were granted the right to vote and run as candidates in the local elections.

Nevertheless, the major change in culture regarding women, occurred noticeably after 2011, with the emergence and proliferation of the deliberate social media platforms, particularly Twitter.

4. Conclusion

The overall aim of this study was to provide answers for the main question: How has the culture regarding women in Saudi society developed since the beginning of the twentieth century? However, as it went further, new unexpected insights and areas were revealed. The thesis has developed substantive outcomes. The main result of the research is the presentation of a narrative that explains, according to the available data, how has the culture regarding women developed in Saudi Arabia since the twentieth century.

The narrative explicates how has the culture changed according to different factors and over different time stages. The findings emphasize the impact of the economic, political and social factors in the cultural changes. It asserts that discussing the situation of Saudi women in isolation of these factors gives an incomplete picture.

The thesis demonstrated that the culture regarding women has not developed in a linear ascending order. The culture went through ups and downs according to the different factors through time. The results indicate that culture towards women was more flexible and

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

stretchable through earlier stages of time before the modernization age. In the age of desert, women suffered from inferior perceptions, yet still, the culture was flexible in allowing women opportunities to lead and acquire higher positions, such as the historical examples of women who ruled their tribes.

In later stages, the results indicate that the oil-boom and the sudden modernization, had negative effects on women through the new alternation to the culture through their marginalization from work and naturalization their roles at homes, alongside a consumerism culture that started to spread.

Later, the effect of the 'Sahwa' or Islamic revival that started in the mid-1980s, had an extreme impact on the culture regarding women. The 'Sahwa' did not affect women by imposing the new culture on them. The majority of women at that stage, embraced these values, justified them, and found a sense of power in the wave of Sahwa. For example, sex-segregation that spread during the age of Sahwa, has been often approached in terms of being banned and repressed whilst actually it gave women at that stage female-only spheres that allowed them to arrange an autonomous space for themselves that allowed them to practice socialization (Le Renard, 2008). However, the Sahwa did implant extreme values regarding women's activities and mobility.

The impact of the Sahwa wave has affected the culture extremely. The sensitivity of the situation allowed the potential of the revival of terrorism trends, which appeared through the bombings in Saudi Arabia between 1990 and 2003.

The events of 9/11 had a fundamental effect on the culture in two ways. It shocked the people with the consequences of extremism, at the same time the sudden change of policies and the reforming project generated a silent resistance. The reforming project appeared for conservatives as a western imposed project to 'westernize' the Muslim society. The

authority was circumspect about the steps for change to avoid provoking terrorism actions or revolutionary attempts.

The poor economy, with the reforming project, opened more opportunities for women to work in new fields. It encouraged women to participate in public spheres and had a notable distinguished impact on the culture and the image of women in their roles.

However, with the social media revolution that started in 2011 had a major effect on the culture. The openness of the debate generated a new culture and encouraged civil values, which had its effect on Saudi women and public perceptions about their rights.

The accumulative conclusion of this research, is that culture regarding women in Saudi Arabia, is not stable as one might think. The slow process of change is not a result of the intransigence of the decision maker, rather, it is a consequence of caution from encountering a rigid resistance and public uprising, or to invoke terrorism actions.

Women's Culture in Saudi Arabia (1900-1941): An Ethnological Study.

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