

A Study on Saudi Female Development: Based on Social Structure Perspective

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Abstract: Women are an important force in the overall social structure, and the improvement of women's status is a manifestation of the progress of human civilization, but the problem of women's development is still serious in many regions. In Saudi Arabia, gender inequality has become a persistent problem in the socio-political and cultural structure, and women have been marginalized for a long time and their basic rights have not been guaranteed. Saudi Arabia is currently undergoing an important social transition, with important changes in the social structure and the transformation of the Saudi economy into a diversified one, which inevitably requires the participation of women. The need for modernization in Saudi Arabia brings opportunities for the protection of women's rights, and the traditional social structure will be a major obstacle to women's development for some time to come.

Keywords: Saudi women; Social structure; Women's rights

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1. Overview of Saudi social structure

The social structure has a profound impact on the political life and economic development of a country, and changes in the social structure directly affect the development trend and fate of a country. Traditional Saudi society was a tribal society, and its social structure was largely influenced by blood factors and showed a clear hierarchy, including an upper level consisting of royal families, tribal nobles, and religious nobles, and a lower level consisting of peasants, tribal nomads, and craftsmen.

The royal family was at the top of the hierarchy, reinforcing its rule through marriage with other prominent or influential clans, controlling all the key sectors of the state, being the maker of major national decisions, and having absolute dominance. The religious scholar class has always maintained a complementary and interdependent relationship with the secular regime, especially the Saudi family, in the process of Saudi modernization, by cooperating with the secular regime, being included in the government, controlling the Directorate of Religious Education, the General Directorate of Girls' Education and arguing and defending the modernization politics of the state. The lower class is the largest and most widespread segment of the Saudi social structure, consisting mainly of rural nomads, peasants, urban workers, and the urban poor, who have low economic and social status, and who participate directly in the construction of the state society and enjoy the most basic rights.

After World War II, with the rapid development of the oil economy and modernization, Saudi Arabia underwent a huge transformation from a traditional agricultural and pastoral society to a modern industrial society, and its social structure underwent major changes.

Since the 1960s, there has also been a unique and critically important new group in Saudi Arabia, namely expatriate workers, who constitute the lower strata of the Saudi social structure. The growing and expanding class of expatriate workers in the Middle East has contributed to the long-term economic development of the Gulf countries, and the high proportion of expatriate workers has had an immeasurable effect and influence on the social structure of both labor-exporting and labor-importing countries throughout the Middle East.

2. Women's Development in the Perspective of Social Structure

The social structure has a profound impact on Saudi political, economic and social life, and moreover, it has a profound impact on the development of Saudi women, often determining the direction of women's policies. Since 1932, Saudi Arabia has undergone a transformation from a nomadic economy to an oil economy, and the transformation of the social structure has promoted the development of women while limiting them to specific fields and spaces.

2.1 Development of Saudi women's education

Modern education for Saudi women started late, in 1950, and the development of the oil economy after the 1970s accelerated the pace of female education. From 1970 to 2005, the number of girls' schools in the Saudi public education system grew to more than 12,000, accounting for 49% of the total number of schools at all levels. As the number of schools increased, so did the number of women in education, which rose sharply from 5,200 in 1960 to more than 2 million in 1999. Female higher education is also improving, with approximately 270,000 Saudi women enrolled in higher education in 2008, accounting for 42% of total enrollment that year.^[1]

Although the level of female education has evolved considerably, the philosophy and nurturing goals of education remain traditional^[2]. In addition, for Saudi female university graduates, employment opportunities are limited to specific fields and to working with people of the same sex.

2.2 Employment of Saudi women

Before the 1960s, the Saudi nomadic economy was largely based on family labor, requiring the cooperation of all family members, and women were an important source of labor in this economic structure and enjoyed certain liberal rights.^[3]

The rise of the oil economy changed the traditional economic structure and changed the employment environment for women. With urbanization, large numbers of families moved to live in cities, compressing the work space that women once had^[4]. This phenomenon continued into the 1980s. Due to the volatility of oil prices and the instability of the oil economy, the Saudi government began to cut back on social welfare spending and introduced a "Saudization" labor policy in response to the economic crisis. More and more women are entering the job market.

Despite the growth of female employment, the participation rate of women in the labor market remains low. The distribution of female employment is highly uneven, with 85% of women employed in the government sector and the majority in education. With the female higher education rate at 50%, the unemployment rate for female university students is as high as 30%, compared to 6% for male university students.

2.3 Social Activities of Saudi Women

In traditional Saudi society, the public space is equivalent to the male space and is the area where political, economic and religious activities are conducted. Women belong to the private sphere, and it is the responsibility of all men to protect this private space.

In the early nomadic and semi-nomadic Saudi economic and social structure, gender segregation was inherited as a social tradition and did not place too many restrictions on women's freedom, which they could enjoy in spaces such as tribes and markets. With the development of the oil industry and urbanization, a large number of women began to enter the cities, and in this context, the Saudi government fixed gender segregation as an institution from traditional social practices and continued to act as a catalyst, so that the government insisted on the segregation of men and women in public spaces such as the streets, education, and commerce.^[5]

3. Structural constraints on women's development in Saudi Arabia

Since Salman came to power in 2015, he has "loosened" the restrictions on women, increasing their status and participation in politics and society, and providing more space for women to move freely. However, the king-led reforms for women have not yet addressed the original political and economic structures and deep-rooted traditional social culture, and the structural contradictions in Saudi Arabia remain a challenge to deepening reforms for women's development.

3.1 The challenge of the stability of the Saudi political power structure

The Saudi royal family maintains the legitimacy of its rule by supporting the Wahhabis, and the financial income obtained through the huge oil reserves is the basis of the royal rule, thus forming a "royal-religious-oil" power structure. The political transition after Salman's rise to power has created uncertainty about the stability of the power structure. The Wahhabi religious elite, who are allies of the Saudi royal family, have long enjoyed influence and voice on issues related to religion in the country, and Salman's reform policies have continuously diluted religious ideological behavior and open-door policies, depriving the Wahhabi religious elite of their

voice and causing dissatisfaction among Wahhabi forces. Women's reform, a social reform project implemented under the leadership of Salman and his sons, has a clear personal color of the ruler, and the stability and potential risks of the Saudi power structure will have a direct impact on the stability of women's policies.

3.2 The challenge of Saudi conservative forces

The transformation of the Saudi state after Salman's rule has to a certain extent reduced the dependence on the oil economy and put Saudi Arabia on the path of diversified economic development, but the results of the transformation are mainly concentrated in the economic field, and the reform achievements in the political and social fields are relatively limited, making it difficult to completely change the basic characteristics of Saudi Arabia's secular alliance and the rule of the state by religion. In recent times, the development path of the Saudi state has always been characterized by a debate between "conservatism" and "openness", and the existence and opposition of these two trends have determined the direction of social change. The great strides made by Saudi women are bound to provoke criticism from conservative and Islamist forces. Therefore, Saudi Arabia still needs to find a balance between conservatism and openness in order to continue its women's reform.

3.3 The challenge of Saudi Arabia's inherent social structure

Despite Saudi Arabia's efforts to diversify its economy and reduce its dependence on oil revenues through transformation, oil revenues will still account for 68.2% of total revenues by 2022. The new crown epidemic sweeping the world in early 2020 will have a serious impact on Saudi Arabia's emerging energy, tourism and aviation industries. Saudi Arabia's well-established social welfare system includes all citizens in the government subsidy system, and the development of all industries relies on government policies and subsidies. Citizens are extremely dependent on the state, and while they enjoy state benefits, they also strive to maintain the system, which is not conducive to the reduction of state welfare policies. The huge fiscal expenditures have increased the financial pressure on Saudi Arabia, and the funds for the Vision 2030 project have been compressed or diverted to other areas, creating uncertainty about the prospects for social reform in Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion:

In Saudi society, gender inequality has become a persistent problem in the socio-political and cultural structure, and women have long been marginalized in society, and their basic rights, such as political, economic, educational and employment rights, cannot be guaranteed. The "male guardian escort" system and the "gender segregation" policy have prevented Saudi women from entering the job market, engaging in various social jobs, and making it difficult for them to integrate into society. Although Salman has initiated women's reform after coming to power and its effectiveness is remarkable, women's reform has not yet touched the traditional political and social structure of Saudi Arabia, and Saudi women still face multiple challenges in their development.

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