

Saudi-U.S. Relations

Information Service

Item of Interest

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Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia

By Raid Qusti, *Arab News*

Editor's Note:

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On Sunday, a radio program on MBC caught my attention. The topic was "Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia." The guest speaking on that topic was Nahed Bashatah, a freelance journalist. Mrs. Bashatah started talking about how women played a vital role in society during the days of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). How the Prophet for example, consulted his wives on matters that concerned the nation and how after the death of the Prophet his companions used to seek the advice of Ayesha (may Allah be pleased with her) in religious and social matters. "All we need to do is to look back at our history and see how Muslim women played a vital role in life," she said.

She went on to say how Saudi women have come a long way and how their potentials and skills have gone global. But Mrs. Bashatah did say that there are still much to be done regarding women's rights in Saudi Arabia.

The first call came from a listener from Riyadh who did not mention her name and only referred to herself as "Umm Omar". She said Mrs. Bashatah was talking nonsense and was not serving Saudi women at all. She said it was completely false to say that Saudi women were not enjoying their full rights. "They have gone into every single field possible; in education, in medicine... They enjoy their full rights in Saudi Arabia as provided by Islam, and to say otherwise would be foolish. Name a single country in the world where women receive their full rights and are honored as in Saudi Arabia." Mrs. Bashatah said: "I wish she could see how society treats divorcees and widows here."

Another call came from Sheikh Abdul Aziz Al-Gasim, a religious scholar. The sheikh said that Saudi women in general were not aware of their full rights. He mentioned for example the right to choose a spouse; the right to be divorced by Islamic law from a man should he mistreat her or deprive her of her rights, including sexual rights. He said that when Saudi women sue for divorce, it often takes up to eight months for the process to finish. In some cases, the judge refuses to accept the reasons, and in some he takes the man's side. But the sheikh also elaborated on the mixing of the sexes and how dangerous that was, especially at work, which could give a

man the opportunity to be alone with a woman, which is forbidden in Islam.

The radio program finished faster than I thought, and I was left contemplating about how a large part of Saudi society is still reluctant to change.

Bold Saudi women who touch upon topics such as the status of women in our country, which is probably the most sensitive of all, are often branded as “liberal”, “secular”, “brainwashed” and “immodest” and other things it would be immodest to mention here. The pressure they have to bear is horrendous. Many websites sponsored by Saudis name their e-mail addresses and encourage people to harass them for what they write. The fact that these women have to put up with some resistance from their own gender only adds more misery to their problems. There are those here who actively resist the government’s call for women’s development on all levels. These people want women to live in the Stone Age.

Some might think that women were only created to serve men, to give birth to children, and to raise them, and that anything beyond that is Western decadence. They do not want women to open their eyes and broaden their horizons and realize that they have been deprived of rights given to them by their religion. Among those rights, as our king said, is the right to take part in decision-making and play a larger role in public.

Every time I think of this topic I remember what Prince Khaled Al-Faisal, founder of the Arab Thought Foundation, said in an interview regarding reforms in Saudi Arabia. “Saudi Arabia is probably the only country in the world where the government is pushing for reforms and the people are pulling back.”

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