

Multilingual Creative Reformists: Saudi Arabian Women's Ingenuity in Overcoming Economic,  
Religious and Cultural Barriers to Career Success

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### Abstract

The King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Programs gives thousands of young Saudi Arabian women the opportunity to study abroad, learn English, and earn advanced degrees. How do students from this religiously conservative nation, studying at two Washington universities, construct career aspirations within a rigid structure in which they face economic, religious and cultural constraints? Women employed many passive resistance strategies to overcome these barriers. Students interviewed all chose to work within the system rather than defy it. The gender attitude of women also impacted how they dealt with various limitations. Those with more egalitarian views pushed the boundaries slightly more than those with more essentialized gender perspectives.

## Introduction

We all live our lives within certain restrictions. Many of these limitations do not cause us great distress. For example, as humans, we cannot breathe in outer space but this is not something most of us fret about on a regular basis. However, some constraints, though as constant as the lack of oxygen on Mars, are much more impactful on our everyday decisions. I was once told that because I am a woman, I could never hold a leadership position. That simple statement forced me to reconsider my entire worldview (up until that point I had believed I could achieve anything I wanted to if I worked hard enough), and caused me to push back on those who implied that I was automatically ineligible for a whole array of career options simply because of my gender.

The lives of Saudi Arabian women are constrained in many ways (Al-Sharif 2012, Doumato 2003, Al-Hibri 2000). They are told that, because of their gender, they cannot vote, they cannot drive, and they cannot have the final say in how they live their lives (Al-Sharif, 2012). Traditional Saudi society lays out a specific role for women, and employment opportunities outside the home are limited (Doumato, 2003). Young, bright women from Saudi Arabia, studying in the United States have career goals that demand fluency in English (Ministry of Education, 2012). These women face economic, religious and cultural barriers to progress in the workforce, yet they continue to improve the fluency in English required by their career goals. How do these women navigate the various restrictions of which they are aware as they learn English in hopes of finding future employment? How do they retain the motivation to pursue positions in which there are few openings (Doumato 2003, 1999, Calvert and Al-Shetaiai 2002, Metcalfe 2007) and from many of which they are denied access because of their gender

(Metcalf 2007, Doumato 2003)? How do they manage that process without renouncing their faith, their culture, their nationality and their families?

The purpose of this paper is to provide an initial study which answers these questions and proposes further areas of potential research. Preliminary findings suggest that Saudi women handled constraints in several ways. The most popular strategy adopted by the women interviewed was to work within the margins to either gently challenge the status quo, or to find a comfortable place within the norms. This is the passive resistance approach. Another possible strategy for overcoming economic, cultural or religious limitations could be to simply defy the rules, to protest or participate in acts of civil disobedience. None of the women interviewed utilized this more radical option. An additional possibility could be that the women would leave Saudi society altogether and move to the United States or another nation in order to gain more freedom. This option was unacceptable to all but one of the women interviewed for this paper.

The women interviewed all chose to work within the system rather than defy it. Considering the potential repercussions of angering the government or local community, it is logical that the students would prefer to carve out a space for themselves without breaking any rules. They planned to find ways to use their English language skills despite the challenges; however, the ways in which they approached the problem were not uniform. When the Saudi women viewed both genders as equal, their instrumental (practical) and integrative (self-enrichment) goals for education thrust them into the public sphere with aspirations that included social activism and landing high ranking jobs. Women with more essentialized gender attitudes (also described as “equal, but different” and characterized by a belief that men and women are inherently different and should not occupy the same roles domestically or in the public sphere),

had goals that would keep them closer to home. In other words, some women more or less adopted traditional attitudes toward gender roles and found a way of fulfilling both their personal goals and social obligations within that context, while other women seemed less able to find a niche within the traditional framework. Instead, they gingerly attempted to either change the norms or escape them.

Constraints	Solution--Passive Resistance Work Within Constraints
Economic (lack of jobs)	Ignore/Remain Hopeful
Religious (along with the government, religion can be used to oppress women)	Reinterpret Islam in a way that affords women more rights
Cultural (essentialized gender roles, promoted through education and championed by conservatives in power)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Work within cultural restraints to find a niche, ex. becoming a teacher in an all-girls school rather than fighting to become an executive in a gender mixed workplace</li> <li>* Work within cultural restraints to remove the constraint, ex. becoming an activist in a grassroots organization but only with government's permission and without pushing the boundaries too much</li> </ul>

### **Background**

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and the home of the religion's most sacred sites. The Saudi Constitution and Islam are inextricably linked, Sharia, or Islamic law governs the people and there is no separation between religion and the state (Long, 2005). An anthropologist and wife of a foreign servant writes, "that it is impossible to overstate the importance of Islam in Saudi Arabia..." (Jordan, 2011, p. 146). It is therefore no surprise that Islamic studies comprise a major component of education. Doumato (2002), along with other scholars (Baki 2004, Al-

Dosary, Rahman and Aina 2006, Metcalfe 2007) have highlighted the fact that a majority of school time at all grade levels and in university in Saudi Arabia is spent in Islamic studies, which does not properly prepare student to be successful in the private sector, but does provide them with a solid understanding of what is and is not culturally acceptable. As an example, some argue that education has been used to entrench gender inequality. Doumato (2002) argues that the religious education component enforces gender stereotypes, stating, the “traditional gender paradigm has been incorporated into the mandatory religious studies curricula to satisfy Saudi Arabia’s powerful and culturally defensive *ulama* (Muslim scholars of religion)”.

Isolated in the desert, Saudi Arabians cultivated their own distinct culture. However, the oil boom of the 1970s quickly introduced large numbers of foreigners to the country. The global exposure brought by oil could not readily be ignored; Saudi Arabia embarked on a project of modernization without secularization in order to mitigate the effects of Western influence. King Abdullah has attempted to embrace the technology of the postmodern world, while maintaining a traditional culture and beliefs. It has not been easy. Long (2005) writes, "from a cultural perspective, dealing with the cultural aspects of modernization is probably the overriding challenge of Saudi society, and the cause of much of the stress this is witnessed in in its younger generations (p. 29)." Long further explains the challenges of modernity:

As the level of secularism begins to rise, younger generations grow impatient with the pace of social change. On the one hand, there has been a significant increase in the number of those who seek to restore a pre-modern Islamic society that they perceive existed before oil; and on the other hand, there is a growing call for social change to accompany economic and technological change. Maintaining an

equilibrium between modernization and a society based on Islamic values will continue to be the country's most pressing challenge in the twenty-first century (2005, p.33).

It is clear that Saudi society is beginning to change and an increase in the number of women working outside of the home is a part of this transformation. However, breaking out of traditional stay-at-home roles can be very difficult. While both genders have conservative norms, the lives of women are especially regulated (Long 2005, Doumato 1999, 2002, Al-Sharif 2012). Perhaps the most famous of Saudi Arabia's restrictions on the lives of women is the driving ban. Women must also travel with a male guardian, a father, husband or even a son, who is a family member. They cannot initiate a divorce in the same manner as men, and are prohibited from working in many professions, and are generally discouraged from working outside the home at all (Doumato, 1999). Though not an official law, in practice, women need a male chaperone's permission to receive medical treatment, and to change coursework in school (Bencomo & Wilcke, 2008). It is this traditional and restricted notion of womanhood that students must navigate in order to achieve their career goals.

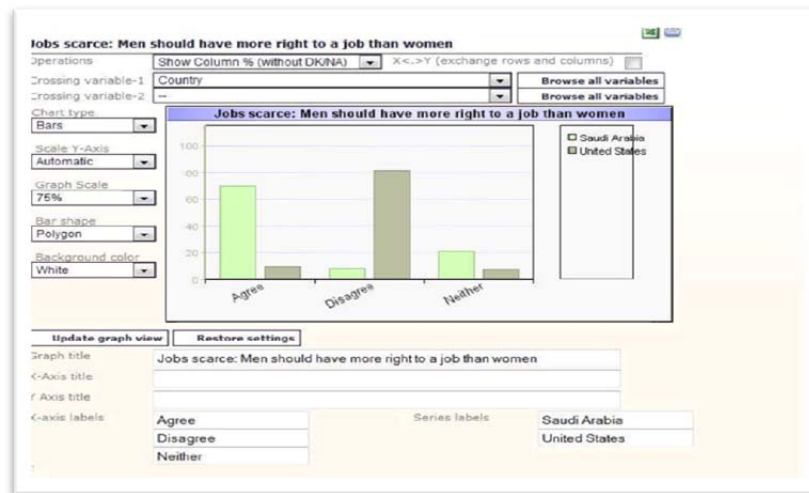
Religion has been used to bolster arguments promoting the restriction of women's freedom (Kucinkas, 2010). Particular verses of the Qur'an, have been used to assert that women should not work outside of the home and should have limited influence (Al-Hibri 2000). Kucinkas (2010) reported that increased religiosity resulted in less egalitarian gender attitudes in men<sub>1</sub>. A highly religious community would be dominated by males who favor traditional gender roles. The entwined nature of mosque and state can result in a conservative theocracy. Al-Atawneh (2009) writes,

[the government] is best described as a ‘theo-monarchy’ shaped by religion and long-standing religio-cultural norms. It is based on an ongoing compromise between the two major authorities, the existing religious institutions and Saudi monarchy. In other words, throughout their cooperation, the ‘*ulama*’ maintained a central role in preserving the religious feature of the state, not only in the social realm, but also in the political one, thus contributing to the theocratic facade of the state (p.733).

Scholars noted that the monarchy long ago pledged to promote the conservative cause in exchange for the support of the King (Clary & Karlin, 2011). The aspects of Islam that might encourage limitations on women’s lives can become enshrined in government policy in order to restrict women’s freedom.

Even as many feminists champion the right of women to earn an income by working outside of the home, there may not be enough jobs to satisfy demand. Doumato (1999, 2002) summarizes quite well the problem of the exponentially increasing levels of educational attainment occurring at a time when women have limited employment opportunities. Saudi women are also restricted in their participation in the workforce. Certain jobs have been unavailable to them, such as architecture and engineering (Baki, 2002). In addition, they are generally steered, or self-selected into the helping fields- education and healthcare, with 96% of working women specializing in these fields (Calvert and Al-Shetawai 2002). A recent newspaper article stated that “it is clear, then, that the most daunting challenge for Saudi Arabia in the coming decades is how to find *appropriate jobs for women*, to help them get their fair share in the development of their country and make better use of their increasingly high levels of

education” (Aluwaisheg 2013, emphasis added). The focus not just on creating jobs, but jobs “appropriate for women”, continues to be an issue. Employment that would take women away from their families or put them in close contact with unknown men is not suitable for the majority of Saudi women. In addition, the highly educated elite are finding themselves over-qualified for the less challenging or menial work that is available. “Jobs available for women are technical or vocational, but many women are getting advanced degrees for which there are no jobs (Calvert and Al-Shetaiwi, 2002). The lack of jobs may increase gender segregation policies (Al-Dosary, Rahman and Aina 2006, Doumato 1999). Indeed, the World Values Survey points to the fact that when jobs are scarce, many Saudis would prefer to fill them with men rather than women.



The figure is created from results in Saudi Arabia (World Values Survey, 2005) as compared with results in the US (World Values Survey, 1999), with 60.7% vs. 21.6% agreeing that men should have more right to a job than women.

In the face of such bleak employment opportunities, how do Saudi women studying in the US on the King Abdullah scholarship think about their education and their career options? Saudi women face all the issues modern Western women encounter today such as finding childcare and dealing with the rising cost of living, in addition to handling constraints particular to their

culture. Modernization theory would suggest that these highly educated women should certainly be earning an income, but it is not that simple. Their work must fall within Islamic law and Saudi traditions. This has very practical implications, such as finding affordable and reliable transportation. In some instances entire separate facilities must be built so that women can enter the workforce. In addition to resolving the practical issues, a cultural shift must take place in order to women to be able to fully enter the workforce and participate in all sectors of the labor market.

Surprisingly, there has been no research on the Saudi women who are living this experience. An Australian study looked at the impact of gender mixing on Saudi students while abroad, though the study was small, with only two participants (Alhazmi, 2010). A documentary entitled, “Saudi Solutions” highlighted the struggle and creativity of women challenged with limited employment opportunities, however, as a film it focuses on the most sensational aspects of Saudi women’s lives, in particular, the veil (Van, 2006). Other research on gender, immigrants and the impact of study abroad on students was helpful but not generalizable to Saudi women (Annick 2002, Qin 2009, Pellegrino 2005). It felt necessary to understand the point of view of the women involved. How do women plan to overcome barriers to their success? How do their ideas about gender roles, influenced by their religion and within the context of Saudi cultural and job restrictions influence their career aspirations?

### **Methodology**

Currently, there are over 70,000 students from Saudi Arabia studying in the United States 47,000 Saudis have already completed their degree programs abroad (Ministry of Education, 2012). One of the primary purposes of the King Abdullah Scholarship is for Saudi students to

serve as a cultural bridge between the US and their home country. The program was founded after the September 11th terrorist attacks in an attempt to improve relations and understanding between the two nations (as the majority of the attackers were from Saudi Arabia). The program is designed to draw a diverse group of students from all over the nation, including both urban and rural youth. In addition, English is the *lingua franca* of Saudi Arabia and in order to obtain desirable employment, students will have to master the language. The Saudi women studying at the two universities at which the interviews took place were all studying, or had studied English in the United States.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with eight Saudi women studying in the United States. In addition, two participants were unable to meet in person so responses to a set of questions were collected via email, for a total number of ten participants. Questions were designed to determine the women's instrumental and integrative motivations for learning English, in addition to getting a sense of their interpretation of gender equality.

A snowball method was used for finding almost half of the interview participants. Once one participant was located, contacts were requested in an attempt to find subsequent interviewees. This resulted in interviewing four participants from a private university in the greater Seattle area. In addition, a list of Saudi Arabian female students in level five English courses at a public university in Washington was obtained. Interviews took place individually, except in the case of a student who brought a friend (another Saudi student was also interviewed), in public places on university campuses over the course of two weeks. The questions asked were divided into four major themes, 1) background information 2) English language experience, reasons for learning and goals 3) work experience and goals 4) degree of

feminism/views of gender equality. It was discovered early on that the Saudi students did not make a distinction between “feminism” and “Islamic” feminism as Western scholars did.

Western scholars make a distinction between the two: “feminism” is secular while “Islamic feminism” has a Muslim perspective and often times an essentialized gender attitude. In the students’ understanding, there is no feminism outside of Islam. Borrowing from Metcalfe’s (2007) phrasing, questions regarding gender equality were reworded to ask if students thought of both sexes as “equal” or if they thought the genders were “equal but different”, with a follow up question that asked women to elaborate on similarities or differences. Whether asking about feminism vs. Islamic feminism or equal vs. “equal, but different” resulted in similar answers, however, the latter iteration made it easier for students to see a distinction between the two categories in a shorter amount of time.

The interviews were recorded (voice). Though there was an interview guide, participants were allowed to expand on aspects that were not asked about, and the researcher probed the interviewee in response to answers that were particularly intriguing. The interview took an unusual turn in two instances, one in which the student was not a King Abdullah scholarship recipient, but instead a working professional sent to the US by her employer (a nursing school), and two, when the participant was an experienced activist and grassroots mobilizer. Both interviews gave greater insight into how two very ambitious women on different ends of the gender equality spectrum envisioned their lives and goals.

The interviewees originated from major and smaller cities, public and private schools. They had a variety of economic backgrounds, represented by the fact that some came from families who were able to pay the high cost of private school tuition while many grew up in

families without those means. Four of the students were in graduate school, while the other six had completed bachelor's degrees in Saudi Arabia and were completing English prerequisites before pursuing graduate degrees in the United States. Two were married, one was pregnant, most were chaperoned by a male chaperon but several were not. The majority were proficient speakers of English, though there was one student who was either very timid or less advanced. There is a great deal of heterogeneity within the population of women in Saudi Arabia, and that diversity is reflected in the young women who I was able to interview.

## **Results**

### **Overcoming economic constraints**

All women were very hopeful about their future and confident that they would be able to find employment in their desired field, despite the fact that unemployment is widespread and discussed in the popular media (Aluwaisheg, 2013). Elham exemplified this hopefulness in spite of the economic situation. She noted that she thinks she will be able to find a job fairly easily because her major (TESOL) is in high demand, while also stating:

*I think job opportunities is very limited for both men and women. Back home we have a huge unemployment problem because the country doesn't create enough opportunity for people.-Elham*

While this student acknowledges the general unavailability of jobs, she does not expect this limitation to impact her directly. For Elham, unemployment was a constraint which burdened other people. Additional students expressed the same sentiment. Khoulood mentioned that she had several friends who were just as capable as herself who were still looking for jobs,

but this was not a problem that she personally encountered. These women did not attempt to throw off the constraints of the job market by moving or working to change the structure of the government or labor forces. They did not petition for the creation of more employment opportunities for women in the private sector, instead, they attempted to do the best they could within their current limitations. This meant that they planned to pursue opportunities in the fields deemed acceptable for women; education and nursing. Two students, an accountant and a statistician, planned to be teachers, rather than attempting to use their skills in the private sector.

The approach that Alaa took varied slightly from the norm. As an activist, she was working to remove the barriers to educational, economic and political success that she feels are holding back the progress of her nation. Through the use of media campaigns, in particular through YouTube, she has launched a grassroots project for youth development. Though she is attempting to change the existing paradigm, her work is designed to flourish within the constraints of the current system. She does not break any established norms or violate any rules in order to accomplish her work. For example, she stated that "we have to be always kind in dealing with the government". She went on to say:

*"[We are working for change] but not in a protest mentality, no. We work with government and we tell them if you will not do this for us we will do it. For example, we don't have, our public school is disaster, so we told them ok, you don't want to give us a good education, we will do it. Give us the permission and we will...this is how we deal with government."*

Researcher: What if the government doesn't give you permission?

*“We change the shape of the project and try it again...sometimes they won’t give us the approval so we give up...in critical times, we can’t do anything. For example, when Egypt had their revolution we stop everything we do because anything we will do it will be for them preface revolution...we don’t want a revolution”*

Alaa hopes that her approach to job creation will work. She says, “I believe revolution is not for our country.” She wants jobs and better economic conditions, but not a revolution. Her desire for passive resistance may be deeply rooted in the context of Saudi culture. For example, many women mentioned the driving ban, and stated that “we will be driving in seven years”. It seemed almost a slogan. It begs the question, how long have women been repeating this statement?<sup>2</sup> Saudi society is notoriously resistant to change (Clary & Karlin, 2011). Maybe this is because of the nation’s importance in global Islam. As the foundation of the religion, perhaps drastic changes are just too threatening to the purity and legitimacy of the religion. Alaa also hints at this reluctance to change:

*Society is not ready for a lot of things. Even my family is very, very open family and they mentioned to me that if the government approve the woman driving in Saudi Arabia you won’t drive at the first. We have to see, we have to look at society to see how they will deal with this thing.”*

When asked if her patient, passive resistance to economic constraints is working, she replied, “I think now, no”. She also stated that she believes it will eventually work, but it will take a long time. In the meantime, others might lose patience.

Researcher: Will people get fed up and call for revolution in the meantime?

*They will. Because I believe that the event of revolution comes because of unemployment and maybe it is the difference between Western culture and Middle East but in our culture we have holy things and, for example, we have our holy months and our religion men and we have also our Qur'an and these things when anyone touch them, these things, revolution will come.-Alaa*

Alaa reflects Long's (2005) research, in addition to sentiments expressed by Al-Sharif (2012); clashes will be between those who call for reform those who are more interested in maintaining the status quo or, "holy things". For now, passive resistance prevails, with the women interviewed in Seattle preferring to steer clear of anything deemed too radical. The potential for unemployment was not something in the forefront of their minds, and they were confident that their English language skills would prove useful in the future, despite the lack of jobs. Unemployment was an issue that challenged "people", but not them in particular.

Part of this hopefulness could perhaps be explained by the fact that the women were either scholarship recipients or in one case, had their studies sponsored by an employer (a university) back home. Having tuition, travel and living expenses paid for might have relieved the women of the immediate pressure to find employment and pay back loans. In addition, a few women mentioned that they enjoyed upper-class status; perhaps their well-connected families would help them find positions despite the high levels of unemployment.

### **Overcoming religious constraints**

Some scriptures in the Quran have been used as tools to oppress women (Al-Hibri 2000, Kristof and WuDunn 2009). However, as Al-Hibri (2000) describes, Muslim feminists have

reinterpreted problematic scriptures and used the larger context of the Quran to justify women's rights to own property and vote, among other things. Western and Islamic feminists have explored different views of Muslim women's role in society. Spring (2001) fits in the mold of western, secular feminists by implying that Islam is bad for women. These feminists aim to rescue Muslim women, perhaps even against their will, from what they see as the crippling effects of their religion (Al-Hibri, 2000). Moghissi (1999), who also believes that Islam is bad for women, claims that the common postmodern feminist approach interprets human rights abuses as mere cultural differences and fails to see women as subjugated. Both Spring (2001) and Moghissi (1999) view each gender as equal, and they are both take a more secular egalitarian approach to interpretations of gender roles. Some Muslim scholars see no conflict between Islam and gender equality (Al-Hibri 2000). These thinkers reject Western secular feminism and instead reinterpret the laws of their religion in ways that give men and women equal standing. Metcalf (2007), in her work on human resources training for women, stated that in Muslim societies each gender is viewed as being "equal, but different". From this equal but different perspective, any proposed reforms would have to be crafted within the existing laws of Islam with respect to established notions of what is appropriate for each gender. Both Killian (2006) and Al-Hibri (2000) suggest working within an Islamic framework to create change. Al-Hibri (2000) writes:

In short, the solution to Muslim women's human rights problems is not to ask these women to cast away their deepest beliefs in search of a Western quick fix. Like their sisters in the West did before them, they simply must face the patriarchal behemoth in their own backyard and win on their own terms (p. 229).

Similarly, participants in the *pink hijab* movement are working within the context of Islam to influence society and support additional women's rights, including the right to work (Wright, 2013). Elham is a clear representation of this notion of an Islamic feminist. Rather than strive for secularization or a separation between religion and the state, she views her religion as a tool for empowerment.

*I have the right to get equal rights as a human being and because I am a Muslim women [sic], I know that Islam protected my rights but traditions and customs sometimes try to rob them away from us. So I think I should stand up for myself, I mean I live in a society that claims to be a religious one yet there are some inequity between men and women that Islam would redeem as injustice so why should I put up with injustices? Yes, because Islam is a very just religion. Before Islam women could not own property, sell or buy. They used to treat women themselves as property. It came and changed the way people treat women in a very positive way. Islam came to say not only we have the right to be treated fairly, we have equal right to men, we can divorce men...etc. Being a feminist in Islam actually opens more opportunities for me, because if anyone doesn't like it I can show them the verse in Quran that says I have the right to do that. For example, women in the time of prophet of Mohammad peace be upon him used to vote! Can you believe it? And now after 1433 years in my Islamic country we can't (although it is changing now we have women enter the political arena). –Elham*

It is clear that Elham has no desire to rid herself of Islam in an attempt to overcome inequity. She does not challenge the religion or teachings, but instead looks to the Quran for

justice. The students interviewed strongly identified as Muslim. They punctuated their statements with “Allah willing”, “peace be upon him” and “I am a Muslim”. In this situation, it is unlikely that they would call for secularization or a separation between the nation and state in order to remove barriers to their progress in the workforce. This tendency works both for and against the women. Doumato (1999) notes that strong ties to religion limit all discourse to religious language, therefore women cannot argue for rights unless they can be justified by Islam. Using the language of religion to defend employment might be successful, Doumato argues, but she also writes that:

Since they must speak from within the parochial religious tradition of Saudi Arabia, what they can hope to achieve is limited. They may seek to extend the number of areas where women may work, but if they wish to ask for equal inheritance, or for an end to male guardianship, or equal rights to nationality if married to a foreigner they would have to argue from outside the parameters of the political culture to which they claim to subscribe” (Doumato, 1999, p.576).

Progress has been made since the time of Doumato’s 1999 paper. Women have indeed sought to extend the number of areas in which they work, and the women interviewed were hopeful that the near future would include even more gains. Several students reflected that they had been changed a great deal by their time abroad. For the first time in their lives they paid bills, managed money and had a sense of independence. However, there is no denying that it becomes difficult to argue for rights that are not supported by the Qur’an. In addition, anyone who does not identify as a Muslim would have a difficult time finding the space to advocate for themselves.

### **Overcoming cultural constraints: two methods based on gender attitudes**

Colaner and Warner (2005) completed a study of religiously conservative, Christian women to learn how their ideals regarding gender equality impacted their future career goals. That research categorized women as complementarian or egalitarian, with complementarians favoring patriarchal gender roles and male leadership, while egalitarians favored equal roles for both genders. The study found that students who viewed both genders as equal were more likely to aspire to leadership positions and desire advanced careers, while women who viewed genders in a complementarian fashion were more interested in raising a family and serving in support, rather than leadership roles.

The Saudi women interviewed revealed a similar divergence in career aspirations dependent on gender attitudes. Those favoring an egalitarian gender attitude aspired for more independence, hoped to change Saudi society, and land high profile jobs and those with more essentialized (or complementarian) gender views reported that they work only until they had children, work only at home in a home business, volunteer, or most popularly, teach at a university

The education and career goals the Saudi women interviewed for this project can be summarized by the following chart representing Egalitarian versus Essentialized gender views and aspirations. Few of the women fell into the egalitarian category based on their unequivocal belief that women and men should have equal employment opportunities. Egalitarians emphasized their duty to create an equal society for women, and one emphasized her independence, self-sufficiently and reluctance to rely on a man for her future security. All of the women said that they intended to work after finishing their degree program and finishing their

English language study, but most preferred to only work for a few years before starting a family. Only two of the women strongly emphasized gender equality; they planned to work in fields outside of healthcare or education, the two areas of work that are socially acceptable for women (Doumato, 2003). They chose instead public administration and social activism. The other eight students worked in or planned to work in healthcare or education (or in one case, both).

	Egalitarian Gender Attitude	Essentialized Gender Roles
Integrative SLA Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social activism (1)</li> <li>• "Do something to better the lives of women" (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become a better wife, mother citizen (2)</li> <li>• Volunteer (2)</li> </ul>
Instrumental SLA Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High paying job (1)</li> <li>• Self sufficient (1)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach at a university (6)</li> <li>• Work at home, perhaps start a home business (2)</li> </ul>

Integrative and Instrumental career goals of Saudi women categorized by gender attitude. The number of times a response was given is listed in parenthesis.

Bryant (2009) did a follow up study to Colaner and Warner (2005) and found that gender attitudes had a profound impact on women’s lives and wellbeing. One study found that adherence to traditional norms for gender behavior was a salient feature in clinical depression in women (Shields, S. & Diccico E. 2011 pp. 494). While it is outside of the scope of this study, it is important to note that patriarchal gender attitudes can have a far reaching influence on women’s lives beyond the career aspirations explored in this paper.

### **Equal, but Different**

The differences between males and females are overt and layered into even the most routine dealings in Saudi Arabia. There are separate parties for men and women at weddings, there are separate entrances for women and men in homes and businesses. The workplace is also segregated either through the use of separate quarters or having entire buildings designated for one gender. There are men's and women's colleges, and a women's city is being built so that females can work without encountering any men. Differences between the genders are emphasized and surrounded in taboo; therefore, it can be difficult for women break out of the expected norm. A Saudi woman cannot simply wake up one day, decide she wants a job at a corporation and then apply for it. One report states, "the Saudi Government is still not that serious about female employment. In the sixth Jeddah Economic Forum, Labor Minister Dr. Ghazi Al Gosaibi *stated that a large majority of families would not want their women to work in the private sector and that some families prefer their women to work only in segregated places* (Trade Arabia, 2005)" (Al-Dosary, Rahman and Aina, 2006, pg. 404 emphasis added). The government continues to insist that popular opinion does not support an increased role in the public sphere for women. Women are especially discouraged from working in corporations, where according to Mona, there is the perception of gender mixing.

Women themselves have internalized the idea of difference between genders. Mona also mentioned that there are some jobs that are just not suitable for women. In addition, as a married woman, she expressed the need to have a position with more flexible hours so that she could properly take care of her husband. The long hours (8am-5:15), and the low pay she received doing accounting work has encouraged her to seek work at the university. Manal also expressed

the idea that there are some positions that males and females are better suited for. For example, she mentioned that men and women are equal in some ways, but not in others, stating that “women fit with doctor, nurse, teacher” and careers that dealt with “human feeling”. When pressed on the issue, she pointed out that men “fit” better with “difficult” or “strong” things. Things she described as “soldieri”. Though she was confident that men and women had different roles to play, Manal was unable to refine those views. For instance, she, as did Mona, pointed out that men are better suited for construction work but she also noted that a female bodybuilder could in fact be stronger than the average male. Though she acknowledged that some women might in reality be physically stronger than a typical man, she still maintained that there are important differences between genders that needed to be considered when contemplating career choices.

Sarah, like several of the other students, became interested in learning English in order to gain a better understanding of American entertainment. Originally a business major, she is now studying education with the goal of working in early learning with young children. She is committed to her studies has been really soaking in her experiences in the United States; making friends primarily with non-Saudis. She mentioned that, “if I am single, I will always work I think”. Though, if she has children, she might feel the need to leave the workforce. Sarah was the only student to point out that staying home with children counts as working. She also emphasized the possibility that her work outside of the home might take the form of volunteer or charity work. “For men I think they all should work...women it is always an option, they can do something for the community”. Women could also open the door for other women in need (those without a male family member to provide for her) to be able to work. Sarah seemed to be focusing her aspirations on the possibility of helping her community through charity or

volunteerism; her career goal was not to climb the corporate ladder or devote her energy to business success.

The interview with Sarah hinted at the notion of education for the purposes of becoming a better wife and mother. When girls first started to go to school in Saudi Arabia in the 60s, the goal was to teach the Quran and home economics. That goal remains today, "...women are expected to have skills in the modern domestic environment such as managing the domestic economy, decorating the house and using new technology within the home" (Calvert and Al-Shetaiai, 2002, p.117). While Sarah touched on ideals of education for family betterment, Tahani highlighted the idea.

*She also needs to know what is going on around her so she can raise her children and educate them properly. I believe that uneducated and unemployed women do really have a negative impact on their children. One of the most important effects is that children will not be motivated to be successful independent individuals in the future.- Tahani*

It is clear that this student considers it her responsibility to have an education and employment that inspires her children. Her focus on children makes sense in consideration of her "equal, but different" gender perspective, the purpose is more domestic rather than corporate success driven.

Research suggests that increased levels education decreases adherence to traditional gender roles (Read, 2003). This has not proven to be the defacto outcome in Saudi Arabia. Nora mentioned that even though her mother received a bachelor's degree, her father insisted her

mother stay home rather than earn an income. Simply obtaining a higher level of education is not enough to change perceptions of gender roles. If anything, education can sometimes reinforce those norms by making education another way to measure a woman's marriageability.

It is important to note that maintaining an essentialized gender attitude did not mean that the women interviewed simply internalized traditional gender roles and therefore faced no problems or cognitive dissonance in deciding on a career path. Even women who favored traditional gender roles lamented their lack of options. It was not uncommon for a woman to at once agree that she was happy to pursue a career in education because that would be suitable, while also wishing that she had more options. Students had to go through the difficult process of determining how, or how not they would put to use their advanced English and content area skills in ways that they felt comfortable with.

### **Egalitarian**

When asked if they planned to return home to Saudi Arabia, nine students replied "yes" and most actually said, "yes, of course", as if there was no other option. Only one student was not so sure. She planned to try and stay in the United States, even though she said stated that her parents would never allow her. She planned to continue her studies, pursue a PhD, and then an internship to prolong her stay. Then, she said, "maybe my parents would realize that I moved". Though her mother never worked, her family now insists that she finds a way of supporting herself since divorce has become more prevalent and a future husband cannot always be counted on to provide support. This participant, Nora, was pursuing a degree in public administration, even though women in Saudi Arabia are not yet allowed to vote and were just recently allowed to participate in government. She stated "we are all human beings and we deserve same things,

we're all humans, that's it". There was no area of employment that she felt was out of reach for women. She felt that her generation was the vanguard. Her future daughters would have an easier time pursuing their dreams, she felt it was her responsibility to pave the way, as difficult as the terrain may be.

Just like the “activist”, Alaa, Nora was hoping to use her degree to aggressively change her country. Though contrary to the activist, Nora entertained the idea of emigrating to the United States. The correlation between career aspirations and gender attitude were interesting. The career goals of Nora and Alaa reflect a greater willingness to pursue an interest that lied beyond the traditional roles for women. They tackled cultural, economic and religious societal constraints without breaking any rules per se, but by gently testing the limits. Both were willing to renounce their plans if necessary; Alaa if the government disallowed her activities, and Nora if her parents would not allow her to stay in the United States. In fact, both students expressed a certain amount of defeat. For example, Alaa stated that in the end she doesn't think her activities will ultimately stave off protest, and Nora mentioned that “it will never happen”, when referring to her move to the US.

### **Discussion**

It is hard to believe that Saudi women were ever denied an education, now that the majority of university graduates are female (Long, 2005). A generation of women has already earned bachelor's degrees, but those degree earners did not necessarily turn into wage earners. Like Victorian education in the United States, early women's education in Saudi Arabia was viewed as a method of creating more marriageable women, well versed in the Qur'an, who would be good wives and mothers. The English language, however, is primarily useful outside of

the home. It is the language of the public sphere, of commerce and international exchange. Now that the women of the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program are learning the language, it appears likely that they will be using it in the marketplace. Indeed, many women already are, but that path has not been easy.

The Saudi women spoken with in Seattle navigated the various constraints they encountered through the use of passive resistance, although the use of more radical resistance is not unheard of in Saudi Arabia. Protests and acts of civil disobedience, though illegal, have happened on occasion. Women have protested the driving ban on at least two occasions (Al-Sharif 2012, Reuters 2012). In one case a woman was fired from her job for participating in the incident, and in another, she was sentenced to ten lashes (Women's International Network News 1991, Reuters 2012). Though her sentence was later repealed, the women involved faced a difficult backlash. Al-Sharif writes that in response to her participation in the driving protest, "they called me a whore, an outcast, licentious, immoral, rebellious, disobedient. Westernized, a traitor and double agent to boot. Pages sprang up on Facebook to denounce me, claiming that men would take their *igals*, cords Arab men wear on their heads, and thrash any woman who dared break the taboo and drive" (2012, p.100).

Another protest, termed the "day of rage" was organized in 2011 (Said & Entous, 2011). This protest raised concerns in the US; there was fear of destabilization in the oil supply. The government reaction to incidents like these can be harsh; the Kingdom has even detained and imprisoned children as a result of challenging their authority (Reuters, 2012). It is not difficult to understand why the women interviewed in Seattle chose less radical methods of reform. Protest was not a viable option for these students. Attempts at reform may actually stir up resistance, as

in the 1979 uprising<sup>3</sup>. For these reasons, change is slow. Perhaps, for these women, their “protest activity” consists of continuing their education and persisting in looking for jobs that may not exist. Their determination might be what continues to gradually change the system.

It is a small group of students who will be leading the charge. Doumato (2002) noted that it has been the ruling elite that have championed the rights of women, not the government or the general public. Like other women’s movements, the cause has been led by an educated, privileged class. Doumato adds that “the students who attend private schools and go abroad to study are most likely to acquire the necessary skills in English and in professions to take the lead and compete successfully in Saudi Arabia’s globalized marketplace” (Doumato, 2002, 249). It is a small cadre of women who are on the frontline. Alaa noted that the general public and government are generally not on their side. According to her, the general public perceived that these progressive women are actually moving too quickly. The necessity of moving slowly in Saudi Arabia has already been noted. It has been rumored that King Faud said on his deathbed, “we are in a terrible position...we must change and we cannot change” (Women’s International Network News, 1991). Change is happening, but so slowly that it appears to be simply lip-service. Alaa was candid, “our government is very smart, they know how to deal with the people”. She summarized that the government was clever enough to relent just enough when necessary to temporarily pacify the people. Just when it seems that rebellion is inevitable, the government agrees to a small concession, such as giving women the right to vote, but not until 2015.

While the government is clever, the women interviewed proved to be quite savvy as well. They picked their battles carefully. While they refused to touch the “holy things” that Alaa

alluded to, they felt more comfortable pushing the boundaries in other areas of their life. The women were very systematic in their process; thinking of ways to please and reassure their families while at the same time working to fulfill their own dreams. For example, Nora was quite careful about the image she portrayed as a respectful, and studious good daughter. As the same time, she had a plan, the timeline of which spanned several years. She would take small, strategic steps to set herself up for total independence. The way in which the women chose to “do gender” reflected their ability to evaluate a particular social interaction and decide on the appropriate level of compliance or resistance. The students must constantly determine how to make their work outside of the home appear no less “feminine” or acceptable than their duties at home.

This is no easy task, given that the social context “simultaneously creates and reinforces cultural meanings of gender and the systems of power and oppression on which it rests” (Shields and Diccico, 2011, p 495). The students must work within a patriarchy that on the one hand holds women in high esteem, while simultaneously devalues them (Shields and Diccico, p. 495). Every social interaction has the capacity to promote the status quo. At the same time, perhaps the “creative reformists” interviewed for this paper will find ways to construct new cultural meanings of gender; meanings in which there is no contradiction between womanhood and full personhood, or between femininity and pursuing goals outside of the home. What remains to be seen is whether or not most women’s extreme confidence that they will be able to achieve their goals no matter what they are, is a reasonable expectation or a dream sure to be deferred. The reality of a high unemployment rate, limited options in the private sector, familial restrictions and notions of “suitable” work environments may continue to limit Saudi Arabian women’s options. A follow up study, several years in the future, to compare women’s aspirations to the

actual positions obtained, in addition to determining what barriers to women's employment in Saudi Arabia still remain would be intriguing.

### Notes

The term "creative reformist" was borrowed from the Said and Etnous (2011) article listed in the references section.

<sup>1</sup>Religiosity impacted gender attitudes in men but the same correlation was not found among participant who were women.

<sup>2</sup>I found quotes of women referencing the imminent end of the driving ban as early as 1999. That is the same year one of the first driving ban protests took place.

<sup>3</sup>Al-Sharif relates the story of the religious, militant activist who took over prominent religious sites in Saudi Arabia in 1979. The man, Juhayman, was executed for his actions, however, the conservative religious interpretations that he was promoting were enshrined in the government. Al-Sharif mentions the Juhayman incident as an impetus to the curtailment of women's rights. Any sort of activism or "stirring of the pot" can result in a strong backlash with unpredictable an unpredictable.

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## **Appendix**

### Selected interview questions

1. How long have you been studying in the United States? What is your age?
2. Are you a participant in the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program?
3. Did you take an English as a foreign language course in the US?
4. Can you tell me about why you began to study English?
5. What do you hope to do with the education you have received?
6. What other goals do you have for the future?
7. Do you think you will be able to achieve those goals?
8. Can you think of potential obstacles that might prevent you from achieving your goals?
9. Some people believe men and women are equal, and others believe that men and women are equal, but different. In general, what you do think? Please elaborate.
10. Do you want Saudi Arabian society to create more jobs for women?
11. Where do you see the future of women in Saudi Arabia heading?