

Deconstructing stereotypes: perception of women in higher education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - A realm of empowerment

Abstract:

The image of a subservient woman who has no other choice but to comply with the norms and rules dictated by the orthodox male-dominated society is perhaps the most common Western perception of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. An entrenched notion, it is for the most part perpetuated by the standards and norms of Western culture, which in turn define how we interpret and look at others. The benchmark then becomes our own culture against which we compare and contrast the ideas and values of other – often non-Western – societies, as is the case with Saudi Arabia. The result is ultimately a Western-infused interpretation that creates bias and overlooks the uniqueness of a particular culture.

The main rationale of the following paper is to deconstruct these stereotypical notions and to describe Saudi society and culture, which is devoid of such Western apprehension. The focus here is to examine the field of female public education, with a particular focus on higher education, and thus to show that Saudi women can be and in fact are empowered by means of education. Historical accounts – especially the reforms of King Faisal and his wife Iffat Al Thunayan – demonstrate the achievements in the field that have furthered women's educational and, as a consequence, labour market opportunities. While the high number of female students and graduates exemplify these advancements, such figures are merely one-dimensional and do not give justice to the underlying complexities. For this matter, the heritage of Bedouinism ('tribalism') and Wahhabism, the orthodoxy of the Ulema with their monopoly over the interpretation of Islam and its consequences, influence the public discourse about advancing girls' and women's situation in the kingdom.

The concept of ijtihad, also used by Islamic feminism, will add another layer to the analysis; it can be seen as a tool that enables Saudi women to move forward on the path of progress by simultaneously balancing tradition and modernity. As a result, a holistic view will be presented in the paper, in which the situation of Saudi women is seen and analysed through the lens of Saudi culture. Then, the unique state of women will not be reduced to the reductive belief that Saudi girls and women are trapped in a parochial, patriarchal system, but can become empowered through education, even in the face the Ulema's monopoly of Wahhabi Islam, which pervades all aspects of life and, so too, the domain of female higher education.

Keywords: Stereotypes; Deconstruct; Female students; Higher education; Islamic feminism; Realm of empowerment.