

# What's Happening

## IN THE WORLD?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 18, NO 10 JUNE 2018

Saudi Arabia places more restrictions on women than any other country on Earth. However, the country is now modernizing some of its laws.

In September 2017 the king announced that the country is going to allow women to drive automobiles. The law is taking effect in June.

Modern treatment of women has historic roots. Customs come from ancient tribes on the Arabian Peninsula that separated men and women. Religion also plays a role. The prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca in the year 570. There he founded his religion, Islam, and later also preached in the city of Medina. By the time he died in 632, Islam had spread across the Arabian Peninsula. People in Saudi Arabia practice a stricter form of Islam than in other countries.

All women in the kingdom have a male guardian. Having such a guardian is not actually written into law, but Saudis generally act in accordance with the custom. Government officials, courts and businesses all recognize the guardian's role in a woman's life. Usually women are not allowed to leave the home alone, and they should limit the time that they spend with men who are not relatives.

A woman's guardian is usually a male relative. Most often it is her father until she marries, then the husband becomes her guardian. Sometimes the guardian is a woman's son, brother or uncle. In any case, the man exercises control over almost all aspects of her life. A woman needs her guardian's consent before she can undertake most activities. They include things like traveling, signing legal contracts, working, and getting married or divorced. Of course, needing the husband's consent can make it hard for a woman to get a divorce.

Gender segregation exists in Saudi Arabia's public spaces. The majority of public buildings have separate entrances for men and women. In much of the country public transportation is segregated, as are parks and beaches. Women are not allowed to use public swimming pools that are available to men. Instead they can swim only in private pools or female-only gyms and spas. One of the fanciest shopping malls in the capital,



### Saudi Women Hit the Roads

Riyadh, contains a whole floor for women only.

Education is an area in which women and girls have had some rights for a while. Girls were first allowed to enroll in school in 1957. At that time there were two private schools for girls. A separate college for women opened in 1970. Now women com-

prise 60 percent of the country's university students. In the past decade the government has even awarded scholarships for thousands of women to study at foreign universities.

Saudi Arabia's King Salman and his 32-year-old son are making changes. In May 2017 the king reduced the number of things that women need a guardian's permission for. In September 2017 women were allowed into the national stadium for the first time. In December 2017 Saudi Arabia allowed the first public concert ever by a female performer. Now more women than ever are getting jobs in a variety of professions.

There never was a written law that forbade driving by women. Local authorities simply refused to issue them driver's licenses. Then in 1990 several dozen women protested by driving around Riyadh. They were arrested, and the government asked a religious leader to pass a rule against driving. He explained that driving would lead women to leave the house without a guardian. It also would increase contact with men who are not relatives.

In September 2017 the king issued a decree concerning women's driving. It announced that, as of June 24, 2018, women will be able to get driver's licenses, and they will not need a guardian's permission. Women also will not have to have a man with them in the car.

Allowing women to drive is going to improve Saudi Arabia's image in the world. Economists say that the economy will improve too, because more women will join the workforce. In recent months women have been signing up for driving schools. They are preparing to get behind the wheel and enjoy a freedom that has been a long time in coming to them.

# What's Happening

I N T H E W O R L D ?

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Modern treatment of women has historic roots. Customs come from ancient tribes that separated men and women. Religion also plays a role. The prophet Muhammad was born in Mecca in the year 570, and there he founded his religion, Islam. People in Saudi Arabia practice a stricter form of Islam than in other countries.

All women have a male guardian. This is not written into law, but Saudis follow the custom. Government officials, courts and businesses all recognize the guardian's role in a woman's life. Usually women are not allowed to leave the home alone. They also should limit the time that they spend with men who are not relatives.

A woman's guardian is usually a male relative. Most often it is her father until she marries, then the husband becomes her guardian. Sometimes the guardian is a son, brother or uncle. In any case, the man controls many aspects of her life. A woman needs his consent before she can travel, sign legal contracts, work, and get married or divorced.

Gender segregation exists in Saudi Arabia's public spaces. Most public buildings have separate entrances for men and women. In much of the country public transportation is segregated, as are parks and beaches. Women are not allowed to use public swimming pools that men use. One of the fanciest shopping malls in the capital, Riyadh, contains a whole floor for women only.



## Saudi Women Hit the Roads

Women and girls have had rights to an education for a while. In 1957 two private schools for girls opened. Then a separate college for women opened in 1970. Now women form 60 percent of the country's university students. The government even awards

scholarships for thousands of women to study at foreign universities.

Saudi Arabia's King Salman and his 32-year-old son are making changes. In 2017 the king reduced the number of things that women need a guardian's permission for. In that year women were allowed into the national stadium for the first time. In December 2017 Saudi Arabia allowed the first public concert ever by a female performer. Now more women are entering professions than ever before.

There never was a written law against driving. Local authorities simply refused to give driver's licenses to women. Then in 1990 some women protested by driving around Riyadh. The government arrested them, and also asked a religious leader to pass a rule against driving. He explained that driving would lead to bad things like leaving the house alone and increasing contact with men.

In September 2017 the king announced that women may drive legally as of June 24, 2018. They will not need a guardian's permission. Women also will not have to have a man with them in the car.

Allowing women to drive is going to improve Saudi Arabia's image in the world. The economy will improve too, because more women will join the workforce. In recent months women have been signing up for driving schools. They are preparing to get behind the wheel and enjoy a freedom that has been a long time in coming to them.

# Background Information

Saudi Arabia has a population of 32 million. Mecca and Medina remain the most important cities in the Muslim world.

Saudi Arabia is the last nation, other than Vatican City, to grant women the vote. In 2015 women were allowed to vote and to run for seats on local councils. Twenty women were elected. Councils must be segregated by sex, so women sit in separate rooms and participate by video link.

Almost all Saudi schools and faculties are segregated by gender. Some colleges use videotape for lectures by professors of the other gender.

About 16 percent of the labor force in Saudi Arabia is now female.

King Salman was crowned in January 2015. He succeeded his half-brother, King Abdullah. Salman's son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has developed a plan called "Vision 2030" to overhaul the kingdom's economy and society.

In May 2017 King Salman ordered that women no longer need permission from their male guardian for entering university, taking a job, and undergoing surgery.

Women's rights groups in the country are now lobbying for the end of guardianship in Saudi society. They are using the social media hashtag "#IAmMyOwnGuardian."

Saudi leaders allowed women to ride bicycles and motorbikes for the first time in 2013.

In Saudi Arabia there are approximately 800,000 foreign chauffeurs who drive women around. The need to hire chauffeurs is a disincentive for women to get a job, since it eats up much of a woman's pay.

Saudi Arabia sent two female athletes to the Olympics for the first time in 2012. Both women covered their hair and had a male guardian.

## Topics for Discussion and Writing

### Pre-reading:

- Name one thing that occurs to you when you think of Saudi Arabia.

### Comprehension:

- Write a paragraph that highlights some of the restrictions that women in Saudi Arabia face.

### Beyond the Text:

- Car companies in Saudi Arabia have begun advertising campaigns that target women. What do you think those ads might be saying?
- Women in many nations, including the U.S., do not receive equal pay for equal work. State why you think that is so, and how that inequity might be fixed someday.
- Saudi Arabia's leaders have a plan for moving the country's economy away from the country's dependence on oil production. Explain why this is a good idea.

## Vocabulary (\*advanced article only)

*Article-specific:* custom; tribe; peninsula\*; prophet; guardian; segregation; spa\*; scholarship; to issue a decree\*

*High-use:* to restrict/restriction\*; ancient; to found; strict; in accordance with\*; consent; to undertake\*; contract; gender; majority\*; to comprise\*; to forbid\*; authorities; to refuse to; economy

## Sources

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*Business Insider* September 27, 2017

*The Week* (London) September 27, 2017

*The Independent* (London) September 27, 2017

*New York Times* September 26, 2017

Human Rights Watch "World Report 2017"

[www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)

*National Geographic* February 2016

## Common Core Curricular Standards

### Reading — Grades 5–12

Quote accurately from text

Cite textual evidence

Draw inferences

Determine central ideas

Analyze structure of text

Interpret words and phrases