

Interview

A conversation with Saudi women's rights advocate Aziza al-Yousef

Rob L. Wagner

Jeddah

When Aziza al-Yousef registered as a student at King Saud University in the Saudi capital Riyadh in the 1980s, she did not need her father's permission. When her daughter enrolled in the same university in 2001, she was required to have her father's signature on the permission slip.

Yousef, 58, the mother of four sons and one daughter, has seen many changes in how Saudi women are treated in public and private institutions. She has witnessed a reduction of women's rights in reaction to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran but has observed, in recent years, restrictions eased ever so slightly and slowly.

The retired professor – she taught computer science at King Saud University for 28 years – is leading a campaign to abolish male guardian regulations that require Saudi women to obtain permission from their father, brother, son or closest male relative to attend a university, travel or seek medical treatment.

"We are just asking to remove the government rule that affects our daily lives," Yousef told *The Arab Weekly*.

Yousef recently attempted to deliver to the Royal Advisory Council a 14,700-signature petition seeking to abolish the guardianship regulations but she was rebuffed and told to mail it. She sent the document but has yet to hear back from the government. Whether the government is taking the petition seriously – it has ignored similar efforts – is unknown but a Twitter hashtag, #IAmMyOwnGuardian, has gone viral to help gain support for the cause.

Yousef said she is optimistic that

changes can be made.

"We are used to 26 years of making demands," Yousef said. "There is nothing we can do but to continue this thing. I hope the government treats this as an economic situation and we hope to get more allies. We have a young population with 50% under the age of 26. It's time to listen."

Saudi Arabia's efforts to diversify its economy mean it must help female university graduates obtain employment in the private sector. They are an untapped resource that women's rights organisers say can help turn around the kingdom's sagging economy. The government hopes to increase women's employment from 22% to 30% by 2030. Women have made progress in obtaining some rights, including appointments to the Shura Council and the right to vote and run for office in municipal elections.

However, the broader issue facing Saudis is not simply allowing women to travel without a man's permission but how to interpret women's rights in Islam. In a country where Saudis often ask foreigners to make the distinction between religion and culture, even Saudis can blur the lines. Throwing in government mandates affecting every female citizen only adds to the confusion. Where religious obligations end and culture and tradition, backed by government regulations, take over is often a mystery.

To Yousef and the signatories of the petition the difference in religious obligations and government mandates is stark.

"In Islam the man should be the breadwinner and the woman who gets pregnant and takes care of the household is not responsible for money," Yousef said. "Islam does not say that women should not work or study but that she is responsible for her own actions and if she has a debt, she is responsible for that debt."

Yet the very essence of guardianship in Saudi Arabia has morphed over more than three decades into one in which a man

who earns the household income "must control the woman", she said.

A woman under any interpretation of Islam is responsible for her own actions, Yousef noted. She added that if a woman "committed a robbery she doesn't get half the punishment of a man" because she is female but "in the eyes of the government she is treated the same as a man".

Conventional wisdom among Western observers is that educated Saudi women understand the difference between male guardianship as defined in Islam and arbitrary government regulations that limit women's rights, but Yousef said supporters and opponents cannot be pigeonholed into one category.

"We have very educated women who are suffering because of the guardianship laws but we also have a lot of educated women who are firmly against eliminating guardianship," Yousef said. "We have ladies who go abroad to study, get their PhD and then return and oppose what we are doing. There is no general rule of who is with who."

She also noted that Saudis are pragmatic when it comes to opposing the petition's goals: "People may understand the difference between rights for women in Islam and what the government is doing but they hold positions in government and they don't want to risk their interests."

Yousef grew up in a free environment in which her father was open-minded. She said she did not suffer the rigid patriarchal control that many of her peers experienced. "We were the lucky ones," she said.

Yousef enrolled at King Saud University when she was a teenager. She dropped out after one semester to attend Virginia Commonwealth University in

"We have very educated women who are suffering because of the guardianship laws."

Aziza al-Yousef, Saudi women's rights activist



the United States, a 178-year-old institution known for its medical research. She was a wide-eyed, 19-year-old with limited English but became a fluent speaker possessing boundless self-confidence during her seven-year residence in the United States. She earned a bachelor's degree in computer science and returned to King Saud to complete her master's degree.

Yousef said the changes she has seen gave her hope for the future but some of the changes can be discouraging; a two-steps-forward-one-step-back process that can be both frustrating and exhilarating.

She said since the mid-1980s she has seen dormitory rules, which kept female students as virtual prisoners, relaxed. It is a small, but nonetheless important, change in campus life. She has also seen that women, who in the 1980s could arrive and leave campus any time during the day, face restrictions.

"Now the gates are closed, so if a student finishes a class at 9 in the morning, she must wait until the gates open at 12 noon to leave," she said.

It is a system that treats women as children with maddening inconsistency but it has not always been that way.

In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia was a closed society with strict cultural boundaries and specific, yet unwritten, rules for the roles of men and women. However, women conducted their lives relatively freely only to see that freedom slowly ebb away.

Yousef points to the 1979 Islamic revolution and the Afghanistan war in the 1980s as turning points.

"We had people making statements to young men that they had to fight the Afghanistan war, which brainwashed a young generation. It wasn't even our war," she said. "After the war finished, everything became corrupted and now it is difficult to correct it."

Rob L. Wagner is an Arab Weekly contributor based in Saudi Arabia.

Iraqi women shackled by cultural constraints

Ahmed Twajj

Baghdad

Iraqi women managed to break many social barriers between 1960 and 1980, gaining access to education, health care and employment, as well as participation in the political and economic spheres, with far more rights than in other countries within the region.

Sadly, many advances for women in Iraq receded in years of violence, conflict and sanctions resulting in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Social Institutions and Gender Index classifying Iraq as being "high risk" for gender discrimination.

The shortage of men during the prolonged Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s allowed women access to roles previously unreachable due to misogyny. Nonetheless, Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the consequent international sanctions resulted in regression of women's rights in Iraq.

Yasmin al-Jawaheri in her book *Women in Iraq: The Gender Impact of Economic Sanctions* described how UN-backed sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s discriminated against women because a lack of funding for kindergartens, transport services and significant reductions in wages acted as barriers to employment.

The 2003 US-led invasion theo-

retically paved the way for a new Iraq built on values of equality and justice. Article 14 of the 2005 constitution supposedly cemented the role of women in society, prohibiting discrimination based on sex.

The legal framework for women's equality, however, is not necessarily reflected by societal norms as explained by Noor Hashim, head of development and marketing of a women's opportunity campaign in Baghdad. "There are no governmental laws limiting a woman's freedoms," explained Hashim, "but it is society that limits freedom".

The culture established in Iraq frequently sees women in only classical maternal roles. "Women only want to cook or clean at home. It is

not laziness but more ignorance," Hashim said. "Women do not know their potential role in society."

Frequently, women are pressured into domestic roles at a young age through forced marriages, preventing them from developing ambitions or dreams. The US-based Population Reference Bureau showed that child marriages in Iraq are on the rise, with 25% of girls marrying before the age of 18 and 6% before the age of 15.

These marriages result in the girls becoming housewives with no potential for a greater role in the wider society. Jawaheri said women in Iraq, especially those who are married, were often prevented from seeking work for fear of their in-

teraction with unknown men who dominate the private sector.

Women in Iraq do play a role in the Iraqi political sphere, with one-quarter of all parliamentary seats required to go to female MPs. Nonetheless, male domination of politics, as well as on a societal level, continues.

Diane Elson, a professor of gender and development at the University of Essex in England, describes the potential of "gendered crises", in which political or economic crises unfairly affect women considering their absence from decision-making roles. History has shown that the rights of women in times of severe crises have often improved. For example, in the United Kingdom women made significant gains in freedom and equality during the world wars.

Iraq, however, despite the crises, is yet to see a significantly improved role for women in society. Often, various public spheres are dominated by men even when a number of qualified women are available. Conferences, panels and lobby groups have a severe underrepresentation of Iraqi women. In a society dependent on tribes, women are denied a role in tribal meetings with the position of tribal chief reserved exclusively for men.

Iraqi women often through environmental pressures, however, put limits on themselves in their role in society, suggesting that certain

roles are for men alone. Hashim explained how even her friends try to place these limits on her. "The women themselves ask me why I do what I do, saying that girls should not be doing such hard work. They start comparing me to a boy," she said.

The Iraqi cultural limitation on women is not restricted to Iraq. Aysha Fekaiki, an Iraqi Londoner and former community and welfare officer at the London School of Economics, explained: "Being in the West, there is regression to hold on to culture from the homeland that is imported as a method of resistance."

Fekaiki repeatedly described her wish to return to Iraq and work on development projects but said: "Thanks to my parents, I have taken the perception that it is unsafe for a woman to work in Baghdad."

The role of women in Iraqi society is not limited by the legal system but by cultural values. There are exceptions. Zekra Alwach, the first female mayor of a capital city – Baghdad – in the Middle East, has broken these cultural limits and proven to be a role model for the women of Iraq.

Ahmed Twajj is a British doctor, born to Iraqi parents, researching in Iraq for a master's degree in global health with conflict, security and development from King's College London. He is also a freelance writer and photojournalist.



A role model. Iraqi Zekra Alwach, mayor of Baghdad, signing documents.

(AFP)