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Saudi Women Rise in Defense of the Veil

Some Conservatives Fear U.S.-Led Erosion of Traditional Islamic Values

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia -- More than 500 women packed the Saudi capital's Maimouna Center on a recent evening to attend a lecture. The women, some still in their full black wraps, filled the rows of plum-colored plastic chairs, while late arrivals sat in small clusters on the carpet and against the wall.

"Whom do we love?" asked the lecturer, a woman, seated behind a desk on a raised platform.

"God," the women answered in unison.

"Then we must obey Him."

She went on to urge the audience members to dress modestly and raise their daughters to do the same. She explained that, despite what some Saudis are now saying, it is a sin for men and women to mix. "Even if people don't see you sin, God is watching," she warned. "On Judgment Day, your own skin will testify against you."

As she took copious notes, Mashael al-Eissa dabbed at tears, overcome by the extent of her religious responsibilities.

Eissa, a fiery young Internet writer, and the lecturer, Afrah al-Humaydi, are among a group of conservative Saudi women trying to redress what they view as an erosion of traditional values in the kingdom and a dangerous shift in the status of women.

"Saudi women are the luckiest in the world and Saudi Arabia is the closest thing to an ideal and pure Islamic nation," Eissa said. "We don't want imported Western values to destroy that."

The changes that have so riled Eissa and other conservative women followed the intense scrutiny that Saudi Arabia received after the discovery that 15 of the 19 hijackers who carried out the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the United States were Saudis. The lack of personal liberties in the kingdom -- an absolute monarchy that imposes a strict form of Islam -- was widely held to be an underlying part of the extremist ideology the attackers shared.

Shortly afterward, strict censorship of the media was loosened and subjects that the religious establishment had placed off-limits for decades, such as the ban on women driving or working alongside men, were openly debated. Women, previously hidden, started appearing as television newscasters, and their photos became daily staples in the press.

King Abdullah, crowned in August, called for increased work opportunities for women and started including female journalists, professors and business leaders on his trips overseas.

And during regional tours last year, both Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes said Saudi women needed broader political rights to make changes in their lives.

But the new atmosphere has alarmed conservative women who are suspicious of U.S. interference and warn

that changes in their status could destroy the country's Islamic framework. Though no figures are available, conservative, religious women seem to constitute a sizable portion of the country's female population, belying notions that most Saudi women are unhappy with their lot and waiting to be liberated.

On the contrary, the black veil and the prohibition against women driving are embraced by many women here as a form of protection and an integral part of their religion.

Faiza al-Obaidi, a biology professor, says she thinks the attempts at Western-style female emancipation are part of a religious war being waged by the United States, "an intellectual rather than physical colonization." Sitting at the food court at the Basateen Mall in the coastal city of Jiddah one weekend, lifting her veil to take bites from a tuna sandwich, she said the West was targeting women, the core of society, as a means of eventually controlling the whole country. "They fear Islam, and we are the world's foremost Islamic nation," she said.

Obaidi shows pride in her religion and resists foreign interference, she said, by maintaining her veil, or *niqab*. "Just because this is closed," she said, tugging at the black material that covered her face, "doesn't mean this is," pointing to her head.

Samia Adham, a statistics professor seated beside her, also in a veil, added: "This is a choice. We choose to be ruled by Islam. We will make changes, but within our religion and in our own way."

Two young men with long hair and wearing bright T-shirts and frayed jeans entered the food court and sat at a table with a young woman. Obaidi shook her head. "You wouldn't have seen that several years ago," she said.

Many Salafi women here, who follow the school of thought that calls for a return to Islam as practiced by the prophet Muhammad and the following two generations, shatter the stereotype of women in black *niqab* as meek and submissive. Often well educated, articulate and sometimes downright aggressive, they include award-winning scientists, writers and college professors.

Khadija Badahdah, a university administrator who holds a doctorate in chemistry from the University of London and wears a veil, said she recently started to grant television interviews because women calling for change were dominating coverage on the airwaves and in newspapers and giving the wrong impression of Saudi women. "They are a minority but they appear to speak for all of us," she said, sitting in her comfortable home in Jiddah on a recent weekend. "This is the beginning of a cultural erosion, and if we don't fight it now, it will continue."

The Salafi women have also used lectures and Internet and newspaper campaigns to combat what they view as negative developments. Though they appear to be fighting against women's rights, they say they are actually fighting for the rights granted to women in Islam.

Humaydi, the lecturer, says she counsels women to educate themselves for at least half an hour a day about their rights under Islamic law. The problems faced by Saudi women, she said, are not because of Islam, which she calls a perfect religion that honors and values women. The fault lies in its improper implementation.

"We were given rights by Islam 1,400 years ago that women in the West only got at the beginning of the 20th century," said Humaydi, a middle-aged college professor. "Muslim women can work, and inherit, and be financially independent."

But working alongside men, taking leadership positions or removing the veil are choices that the religious women say are not open to them. This year a Gallup poll in eight predominantly Muslim countries found that only in Saudi Arabia did the majority of women not agree that women should be allowed to hold political office. Last summer, 500 women addressed a letter to Abdullah asking him to save the country from the

onslaught of Westernized ideas regarding women and to maintain the ban on women driving and working with men.

Men and women should not share work spaces, Humaydi contends, because Islam says not to place oneself in an environment where adultery can occur. "People are wonderful, but the devil doesn't sit still," she said, adding that even Bill Clinton, while president, "couldn't resist him."

At Jiddah's King Fahd Medical Research Center, a small Casio recorder played Koranic verses in the background as Faten Khorshid peered through a microscope, her niqab falling past her shoulders over her long white lab coat. Khorshid, who received a government grant for cancer research, says that her conservative views have not held her back and that the niqab makes it easier for doctors to concentrate on work instead of one another. "I don't want to be the equal of a man," she added. "In many ways, I am better than him."

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