



Global Voices Information Sheet

Women in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia at a Glance

- Saudi Arabia is an Arab country and the largest on the Arabian Peninsula. It is the world's leading petroleum exporter.
- The Kingdom is an Islamic absolute monarchy led by King Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz.
- Legislation is made by the Council of Minister and receives royal decree from the King. All law must be in accordance to Shari'a.
- Although the country has been accused of tolerating extremism, it generally works to maintain cooperative relations with oil-producing and oil-consuming nations.

Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia

- Women's rights in Saudi Arabia have been likened to South Africa's apartheid system.
- Controls include separate schools, inequities in legal rights, unequal access to the workforce, and restrictions on freedom of movement and speech.
- Wearing the hijab is enforced and all Saudi women are required to wear a full black cloak called the abaya and a headcovering.
- Women are not allowed to drive cars, ride bicycles or travel in a car with a man who is not a male relative. They must ask the permission of a male relative to study, work, travel or marry.

Key Terms

annul – to make void or null; abolish; cancel; invalidate

human capital – a measure of economic value on an employee's skill set. It recognizes that not all labour is equal and that quality of employees can be improved by investing in them. The education, experience and abilities of an employee have a value for employers and the economy as a whole.

ironic – poignantly contrary to what was expected or intended

segregate – to separate or set apart from others or from the main body or group; isolate

Global Voices Secondary Educator Resources

Note to Educators:

The following activities are designed to stimulate a current events discussion. Generative in nature, these questions can be a launching point for additional assignments or research projects. Teachers are encouraged to adapt these activities to meet the contextual needs of their classroom.

In some cases, reading the article with students may be appropriate, coupled with reviewing the information sheet to further explore the concepts and contexts being discussed. From here, teachers can select from the questions provided below. Activities are structured to introduce students to the issues, then allow them to explore and apply their learnings. Extension and conclusion activities are included to challenge students and finally, encourage them to reflect on the issues at hand.

Since these activities are designed as discussions rather than formal lessons, assessment strategies are not included.

Note to Educators: This column presents issues of gender inequality in Saudi Arabia with a clear position that inequality limits the country's potential as a world leader. To encourage critical thinking, the activities below also challenge students to consider alternative points of view. Teachers are reminded to consider students' cultural and religious backgrounds prior to implementing this activity.

Pre-Reading Questions:

Ask students to answer the following questions (individually and confidentially):

- When you first walk into a new classroom, how do you choose your seat?
- How do you make that same decision on public transportation (i.e., bus, subway or streetcar)?
- What type of transportation do you use most often? Do you ever use this type of transportation alone?
- At what age (or age range) do you plan to marry?
- At this point, what level of education do you hope to achieve (i.e. secondary school, university/college, graduate school etc.)?
- List the factors that may influence your career choices (i.e., income potential, years of training required, aptitude for a subject area, family tradition etc.)?

Post-Reading Questions:

1. Using examples from the column, in what way is the life of a Saudi Arabian woman different from yours?
2. If you could, what questions would you ask a Saudi Arabian woman?
3. What do you find most surprising in the column?

4. What is the author's point of view on this issue?
5. Is there an alternative perspective, and if yes, what do you expect would be a response to this column?
6. Whose voice is missing from this column?
7. The writers use imagery throughout the column. Give examples and discuss the effectiveness to persuade the reader of their argument?
8. What is meant by the term "apartheid?" In what historical context has this term been used before and why do you think the authors chose it to make a point in this column? How does it affect you as the reader?
9. Look back at your answers in the pre-reading questions. Imagine you do not have the freedom to make the choices you indicated because of your gender? How would you react and feel (**Note:** It will also be interesting to gauge the male students' reactions for comparison)?

Extension/Debate:

Some would argue that the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia is a cultural norm that is accepted in that country and therefore should be respected. Others would argue that basic human rights are being denied and change is essential. In small groups, create a response in support of both sides. Recommend students research the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights as well as cultural norms of Saudi Arabia including, if possible, the opinions of Saudi Arabian women. Follow up with a large group debate or individual persuasive writing assignment.