

# Gender Inequalities in present-day Saudi Arabia and Meiji Japan

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## Abstract

Recent racial or gender-rights movements have brought social inequalities into sharp focus. Although it may be impossible to eliminate all prejudices in society, it is crucial to remember the extensive social reforms that have been made during the last century. To better understand various social problems between the past and modern society, this article compares gender inequality between present-day Saudi Arabia and Meiji Japan, a period of rapid economic and social developments from 1868 to 1912. While women's rights in Japan have gone through numerous phases in its long history, Saudi Arabia could learn from some of Japan's historical and more recent efforts at improving gender inequalities.

## Introduction

Saudi Arabian women – just like Muslim women globally – are perceived by the West as subjected to conditions that deprive them of equality. There are three meanings that define gender inequality. In the first definition, men have better opportunities compared to women and have more freedom with higher social regard compared to women who have the same characteristics as defined through classes, nationality, and the age of the persons concerned (Hooks, 2003). Secondly, inequality can be seen when men hold sway on societal issues such as marriage and other direct gender relations; thirdly, men have a strong hold on the

political, economic, legal, and cultural issues of society, while women are required to play second

fiddle (Hooks, 2003; Jackson, 1998). Gender equality in Saudi Arabia and Meiji Japan can be examined based on the principle of equality where gender applies in a two-fold sense: the relations between men and women in the gender divide and the relations among women on the basis of their classes, nationality, and ethnic groups (Correa & Petchesky, 2003).

Gender inequality as a concept has existed since the 1980s. During the mid-90s, several international conferences were held to determine the state of gender equality in

developing countries. According to Wang (2010), the June 2000 meeting of various nations was the confirmation of gender equality and sustainable development of women as a central issue. Based on the definition given by Gornick and Meyers (2009), the term gender inequality points to the unequal valuing of roles played by men and women. Gender equality is, therefore, the equal treatment of men and women in law and policy and access to resources and services. The achievement of gender equality becomes possible when the behaviors, aspirations, and needs of both men and women are given equal favor without considering one above the other. Gender inequality has a number of implications in the lives of persons, with the most consequential being that it is the basis for people to act with biases. Countries in the East have systems of gender inequality which is entwined with numerous spheres such as the economic and social organizations (Ridgeway, 2011). This paper will examine the history of Japanese female rights and privileges in Pre -, during and Post - Meiji eras, compare this history to the recent changes in Saudi Arabia, and recommend the lessons for Saudi on Japan's changes.

## **Gender Equality in Japan**

### **a) Female Rights and Privileges in Pre-Meiji Japan**

Japanese society has evolved for women for centuries. The participation of women in

Japanese society has varied across time based on social classes. For instance, Japan produced female emperors as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> Century. In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century – known as the Heian period – Japanese women had the right to inherit property; they could manage the inherited property and register it in their names (Patessio, 2011). Bluntly stated, the late Edo period to the Tokugawa period was characterized by a Japanese system with segregation of persons where property ownership for women, their education, and discrete handling of lovers were allowed. During the period, the superiority or inferiority that persons had at the time was responsible for assigning them their status; societal hierarchy was also based on both sex and age. The gender of the Japanese designated their roles and status within the community. Therefore, in the Edo or Tokugawa period, the situation of women had a manifest deterioration.

As noted in the work of Kaibara (2010), women handled stereotyped roles such as house chores, birthing children, and managing general household duties after marriage. Following a separation, men and women could live separately as determined in the eleventh Century; men were not required to raise or provide for the children and lived separately. The position of women in society had been cut to size during the period. The nuclear family confined the roles played by women to the family in the pre-modern era of Japan. During the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, the husband was the one supposed to join the wife in her household,

though the couple lived together. According to Hane and Perez (2013), a focus on physical strength and prowess on martial matters became a significant quintessential issue as the samurai class began to gather momentum. Confucianism had a burgeoning emphasis on Confucianism and emphasized masculine ascendancy. The developments of the Tokugawa period can be attributed to a decline in the status occupied by women in society as women took an inferior position in Japanese society.

### **The Meiji Era for Women**

The Meiji era was characterized by investments into silk and cotton industries and growth in women's participation in industrial Japan. The Meiji government invested heavily in silk and cotton and expanded the economic base to include railway lines and the mining sector (Narayan, 2016). Growth in the Silk and Cotton industries invited a rise in the demand for labor. About 800,000 women entered the workforce. However, women were underpaid, underage, and impoverished; the reasoning behind this is that they were docile and obedient, hence could accept very low wages. Despite the inclusion of women in the cotton industry, their wages were significantly lower than that of men (Hane, 2003).

The equality of Japanese women has had a downward spiral since the Tokugawa period. The inception of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century came with the rise of movements and actions in support of the rights of women in Japan. Concepts regarding the rights of women in Japan can be traced back

to Japan's antiquity. The movements became a reality after Western thinking reached Japan's shores during the Meiji restoration of 1868 (Patessio, 2011). According to Hane and Perez (2013), the Meiji era was characterized by the abolishment of the Tokugawa social class system. However, the era did not significantly change fortunes for women during the Meiji era. Women were still under the patriarchy. Women were subject to the patriarchal head of the family.

The Meiji era was characterized by education for women. The Meiji government started school education to promote the modernization of Japan (Kiguchi, 2005). While school education began with the Meiji government, the equality of the sexes and the monogamy system worked through the intellectuals of the time. The introduction of education in Japan by Meiji leaders was premised on the belief that people had to be educated so that Japan would become modern. As such, the leaders enacted the Fundamental Code of Education in 1872; schools were opened in Japan; during this era - there were more than 20,000 schools (Kiguchi, 2005). However, the education policy for women was aimed at making women good wives.

The involvement of women in politics in early Meiji was characterized in different forms. The first set of women involved in political activities were those that met famous personalities with political clout. The second group was part of the political activism of their husbands in the Movement for Freedom and Popular Rights.

The third group participated in politics as a quest for women's advancement. The involvement of women in political matters came for some through the quest for women to be accorded the right to vote (Patessio, 2011). According to Patessio (2011), involving women in political associations where they could take part in political discussions and decision-making was the most important thing. This quest extended to the collection of funds for men in their political activism, supporting the opening of reading rooms for the Movement for Freedom and Popular Rights, and engaging in international discussions concerning female political rights.

The introduction of prefectural assemblies led to a significant rise in the number of women that attended political meetings during the Meiji period. The Meiji government allowed a small percentage of men the right to vote or participate in elections as candidates; the populace began receiving education on how to participate in politics nationally actively. The articles documenting the presence of women in such meetings point to the fact that women were involved in education concerning local politics. As pointed out by Patessio (2011), some women could be heads of households and had the right to participate in elections in local assemblies as voters and candidates; assemblies that allowed such participation were run by men allied to the Movement for Freedom and Popular Rights. However, the activities of the Movement for Freedom and Popular Rights against the government led to the decision by the

government only to allow a select group of men that paid a required amount of taxes to vote in local elections.

The presence of women in political spaces ignited a conversation regarding the inclusion of women in politics. The conversation around including women in politics was by men who were influenced by the translations of the West. Doi Koka argued using the thoughts of John Stuart Mill concerning the rights of humankind, which are deemed valid for women. In his text, Koka criticizes the Onna daigaku because of the bigoted teachings. In light of his criticism, he encouraged a state in which women were educated, could acquire property, and have marriage rights as men did, and have harmony in their marriages.

### **Women in Post-Meiji Japan**

The Taisho period of 1912 to 1926 was characterized by the rise of the service sector to offer new employment opportunities to women. However, shades of patriarchy were strong, given that the goal of involving women was to protract the image that women are nurturers. As nurturers, their function was to nurture the family and the rest of society. Kinsella (1995) reports that the word *ga:ru* (girl) was used. The implication of the word is that the jobs in question were for unmarried women, especially because of the grooming styles where women wore uniforms to portray the adoption of western cultures and emphasize the quest of Japan to be and keep up with modernity (Kinsella, 1995).

Women participated immensely during the Second World War, given that Japan was part of the Axis powers. As such, the 1930s and 40s were characterized by a change of tune where the emphasis shifted towards the reproductive role of women. The Showa period (1926-1989) is when Japan determined the need to conserve motherhood and stressed the need for women to develop the nation (Ramos & Garcés, 2005). However, the individual contribution of women and individual stature in society was not considered. Women were looked at as members of society. As such, their importance came through marriage and having families. The duties of women were limited to waiting on their husbands. This limitation came despite the economic and technological developments after World War II that propelled Japan forward (Ramos & Garcés, 2005). The rights of women improved from 1946 onwards, but the mentality of the Japanese regarding the roles of women in society has never changed. For instance, Japan has approved universal suffrage through the reforms of 1946. Other developments include co-ed secondary education, opening doors in universities for women, advocating for equal salaries through laws passed in 1947, and according to women holidays and maternity leaves.

### **The History of Women Rights and Privileges in Saudi Arabia**

The existence of the current Kingdom of Saudi Arabia came out of the arrangement between

religious and political powers during the middle period of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The State of Saudi Arabia has existed since 1932 after a political unification that came with rapid economic and social transformations that characterized the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The generation of Saudis following the unification had a traditional existence; they existed based on their tribal affiliation because the state had just risen to help with the formation of institutions and development of identity (Al-bakr, Bruce, Davidson, Schlaffer, & Kropiunigg, 2017). The generation born during the 1950s is responsible for the integration, wealth, education increments, and expansion of Saudi Arabia in its contact with the West. After post-unification, Saudi Arabia continues to struggle in its quest to make sense of the changes concerning gender roles.

The rights of women and men in Saudi Arabia are as limited or expanded as the Quran and the Sunna. The 1992 Basic Law of Saudi Arabia makes the Quran and Sunna the governing laws of the country (Crystal, 2005). Political leadership in Saudi Arabia is determined by the family of Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud and his descendants. Since the affairs of the country are run by the Al Saud family, the participation of women in political affairs is non-existent; women have no political right to be part of public decision-making. Women - like men - cannot vote in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Political parties are also forbidden from existing in the country.

Though Saudi Arabia has recently made progress in the education and employment of women, discrimination of women persists in governmental and social structures. Gender discrimination in Saudi Arabia is evident through the government and social structures of Saudi Arabia (Crystal, 2005). Gender discrimination is part of the country's practices and interpretation of religious teachings. The access of women to employment has limits; women do not have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of being a citizen or a full adult (Varshney, 2019). However, there are reformers within the Saudi society that have recognized the need for change and have taken steps to realize such change.

Despite the dictates of Islam through the Quran and Sunna, the last decades have seen some changes in Arab countries, with globalization contributing to differences in the way people perceive society. The rise of social media (Almujaibel, 2014), a youthful population interacting with the world through education (Yusuf, Alsharqi, & Durrani, 2015), e-learning (Badwelan, Drew, & Bahaddad, 2016; Yusuf, Alsharqi, & Durrani, 2015), and the rise of movements advocating for women's rights (Butters, 2009) threaten to upset the traditional order. The groups are an indication that the Saudi society that will come in years to follow has a crucial role in the acceptance or rejection of social and political changes occurring in societies. Research conducted by Kucinkas (2010) determined that the level of religious grip

for traditional practices is losing out to the desire for an egalitarian society in Saudi Arabia.

The two themes that have gained momentum in Saudi Arabia concerning the affairs of women are gender equality and empowerment of women. The empowerment of women became an issue of concern during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The theory of empowerment has emerged and led to the discussion of numerous issues affecting women in numerous nationalities. However, Albakr, Bruce, Davidson, Schlaffer, and Kropiunigg (2017) contend that the perspectives of Saudi women on the question of empowerment have been omitted from the theoretical discussions. While there is extensive literature on the empowerment of women, literature concerning Saudi women is scanty (Albakr, Bruce, Davidson, Schlaffer, & Kropiunigg, 2017). Literature concerning the affairs of Saudi women has touched on thematic areas such as education, employment, social standing, and religious concerns. However, discussions regarding women in Arabia have been limited by Islam. The impression created is that the place or position occupied by women in Islam and Islamic states is of great concern for scholars, though only within these limits (Doumato, 2010). Vidyasagar and Rea (2004) contend that publications on the status of women in Saudi Arabia do not exist. Based on the fact that women's issues are regarded as highly sensitive in Saudi Arabia, numerous authors steer clear from discussions concerning women.

## **The Impediment to Involving Saudi Women in Empowered Positions**

The Saudi treat the discussion of women's affairs as taboo. For the Saudi, issues revolving around the Saudi woman are to be objected to publicly. The Arabian peninsula – through its cultural and religious practices – considers the mentioning of women in a public talk to be a shameful act since women are to be treated as sacred secrets. As sacred secrets, they are not to be revealed before strangers. The concept of a woman as a sacred secret has lost meaning in other secular societies. Such societies may view the act as strange to the globalization process (McFadden, 2001). Women have come up to expose their discrimination and increase their participation in their society.

The empowerment of women and their stake in the quest for gender equality are largely absent in Saudi society. The only avenue that Saudi women have in their reach for gender equality and empowerment is through the activities of NGOs running projects that seek to ensure women have an equal stake in society (Alghamdi, 2014). An organization like the Alwaleed Bin Talal Foundation (ABTF) focuses on women's empowerment by implementing projects that seek to help women improve their lives. However, the role played by NGOs is limited because of Saudi society and its traditions.

Despite the limited spaces for women in Saudi Arabia, Saudi women keep excelling for long – they are good at establishing start-ups. A good

example is the case of Wafaa Al-Ashwali (Varshney, 2019). Her business launch had a meteoric rise after the launch of Seviis. The application has connected consumers with close to 2500 service providers in Saudi Arabia (Cuthbert, 2017). Fry (2015) describes Lubna Olayan as an excellent performer in the Gulf region – he describes it as commendable. Saudi women can come up with a great economic foothold in Saudi society with a limited domain.

## **Comparisons and Lessons That Can Be Drawn From Japan's Changes over Time and What Saudi Could Learn**

The difference between Japan and Saudi Arabia on women's rights is that Japan is a secular society while Saudi Arabia is an Islamic theocracy. The secularity of Japan allows for the clamor of the rights of women to thrive more than Saudi Arabia does. Saudi women are limited in their advancement because of the dictates of Islamic holy books – the Quran and Sunna (Alsaleh, 2012). Women in Islam have limited room to enjoy the same rights as men. Further, Saudi Arabia is a kingdom. As such, the existence of a theocracy favors the rulers because they use it to control the populations (Liyanage, 2010). This explains why the strides in promoting gender equality in Saudi Arabia are strained, while those of Japan are wide.

Buddhism and Shinto – the dominant religions in Japan – are far less patriarchal compared to Islam. The reduced patriarchal undertones in

Buddhism and Shinto religions have created room for women to see their equality with men on the basis of opportunity. This explains why Japan has a greater deal of equality when compared to Saudi Arabia. Since the two countries differ in the extent to which patriarchy is promoted, there is a significant difference between the two countries.

The rights of Saudi women are fundamentally different from those of the Japanese based on the freedom accorded to each in their country. For instance, Japanese women can engage sexually outside their marriage and perform activities such as driving, swimming, and conversing with anyone. Such freedoms are not accorded to women in Saudi Arabia. The trends experienced in Saudi Arabia come from the desire of the king to make the country become a desirable tourist destination. The king has taken to grant women more rights and freedom; the trend might lead to a quest for progressive changes in Saudi Arabia.

Japan's growth towards gender equality is slower when compared to that of Saudi Arabia because of the motives driving the growth. Saudi women seem to be repressed in their quest for growth when trying to change. Japanese women seem to be more accepting and reduced on activism. The women in Japan tend to be more accepting, yet they have more human rights than Saudi women. Therefore, Japanese women tend to be more stagnant in their quest for gender equality compared to Saudi women.

### **What Saudi Arabia Can Learn**

Saudi Arabia can become a hub for women's rights and advancements by enshrining freedom of worship in the constitution to allow for secular influence to influence the advancement of women. The country can take up Japan's growth strategy of realizing its vision promoting the empowerment of women (Saudi Japan Vision 2030, 2020). Empowering women leads to the development of a diverse and vibrant workforce. The development of Saudi Arabia politically, socially, and economically may rely on its secularization in the way Japan became a secularized society.

In conclusion, both Japan and Saudi Arabia are on a path towards the empowerment of women to achieve gender equality. Pre-Meiji Japan had traces of women empowerment which was lost and reclaimed in the Meiji era. The adoption of universal suffrage in Japan led to developments in Japan that have accorded Japanese women certain rights that were not given to them during the eras of the emperors. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has undergone developments that have ignited the quest for women's empowerment and gender equality. The difference in the two countries lies in the rapid development of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia and a slowed process of the same in Japan.



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