

---

## BEHIND THE VEIL: THE PLIGHT OF THE EXPAT WOMEN IN KSA

MIRUNALINI .P, DR. RAMANI

---

**Abstract :** Women are so coveted and hidden within the public sphere of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is almost as if they are the most beautiful pearl encased in an impenetrable shell made of diamonds. When I first walked through the luxuriously built malls in Riyadh, I came across Saudi and expat women (Muslims and Non-Muslims) walking around in black abayas (a long black long-sleeved robe) and niqabs (A veil worn in public, covering all of the face apart from the eyes). It was very mysterious at first sight but later on, it got attuned when survival became primary. This scenario always left me wondering about the woman beneath it all. Jean Sasson's "Princess A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia" inspired me to go deep into the life of the Saudi and expat women in KSA.

**Key Words:** Expatriates, women, abaya, gender, frustration, conveyance, Saudi Arabia, Riyadh.

---

**Introduction :** Saudi Arabia was an economy based on subsistence agriculture by a population that was largely nomadic until the discovery of oil in the 1930s.<sup>[3]</sup> The Kingdom didn't have widespread electricity until the 1950s. It didn't abolish slavery until the 1960s. Due to a sharp rise in petroleum revenues in 1974 following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Saudi Arabia became one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. It enjoyed a substantial surplus in its overall trade with other countries; imports increased rapidly; and ample government revenues were available for development, defense, and aid to other Arab and Islamic countries. Most workers, particularly in the private sector, are foreigners (expatriates). Expatriates all over the globe choose this country to work because it is a tax free country so the remittance would be satisfactory.

### **Plight of the expat laborers**

Migrant women or Expat women, often working as domestic helpers, represent a particularly vulnerable group and their living conditions are sometimes slave-like and include physical oppression and sexual harassment. In 2006, U.S. ambassador John Miller, Director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, said the forced labor of foreign women domestic workers was the most common kind of slavery in Saudi Arabia. Miller claimed human trafficking is a problem everywhere, but Saudi Arabia's many foreign domestic workers and loopholes in the system cause many to fall victim to abuse and torture.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **Life within the confined walls**

Expat women are burdened with lot of restrictions and confinements because of the only reason "gender". For the longest time, expat women's issues in Saudi Arabia were something I was aware of, but never concerned with, until they began to affect me. A thing does not matter as much, unless it is a threat to our way of life.

Women are required to wear abaya when outside the home; however, non-Muslim women are not required to cover their face. Mutawa (religious police) would

insist non-Muslim women to veil their hair as it is considered haraam (sinful or forbidden) to leave the hair open in the public domain. Women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, most Saudi scholars and religious authorities have declared women driving haraam (forbidden). Commonly given reasons for the prohibition on women driving include.<sup>[8]</sup>

1. Driving a car involves uncovering the face.
2. Driving a car may lead women to go out of the house more often.
3. Driving a car may lead women to have interaction with non-mahram (not a blood related person/stranger) males, for example at traffic accidents.
4. Women driving cars may lead to overcrowding the streets and many young men may be deprived of the opportunity to drive.
5. Driving would be the first step in an erosion of traditional values, such as gender segregation.

Expat women face a lot of inconvenience as there are several things that are inaccessible because of the gender (woman) – even menial things like no trial rooms inside textile stores. Which is a big issue when you end up getting something in the wrong size and then have to wait for your husband to take out the time to take you back to the mall to exchange it because he's most likely not willing to drive you right back. Even to fulfill your day to day needs there is no other choice other than relying on your husband for transportation if you are married. For the unmarried expat there are school or hospital conveyance for the pickup and drop. There are no major sources of transportation other than taxis in Riyadh. Restrictions on movement have had a similarly devastating impact on the health leading to a lot of frustration and stress. Women face several restrictions based entirely on gender. A woman, regardless of age or marital status is required to have a male guardian. Her guardian may be her father, her husband, her uncle, her brother, or even her own son. In addition to it information was not always easily

accessible and it was not as easy to form networks and find things.

Saudi activist Wajeha Al-Huwaider agrees that most Saudi men are caring, but "it's the same kind of feeling they have for handicapped people or for animals. The kindness comes from pity, from lack of respect." She compares male guardianship to slavery. There are professional expat women in Saudi Arabia, but their job descriptions are limited to the schools and hospitals. The schools in Saudi Arabia are segregated by gender, this includes the teaching staff. Expat women have to make many compromises because the skills may not be employable here, or you might not find activities that you enjoyed back home. Most female expats are trailing spouses; those who choose to follow their husbands who are sent to Saudi.

Educated expat women's most preferred choice is teaching because it has benefits like concession in school fee, six hours of straight duty (6.30 to 12.30) unlike hospitals which has two divided working hours (9 to 12 and 4 to 9). Career opportunities are ultimately limited to expat women because of the localization "nitaqat" system.

Technology is a central part of higher education for women. Many women colleges use distance education (from home) to compensate for women's poor access to transportation. Male lecturers are not allowed to lecture at women's classes. Since there are few female lecturers, some universities use videoconferencing to have male professors teach female students without face-to-face contact.

#### **Findings: The established social rules curbs women's liberty**

The quality of life of a woman depends entirely on her family, namely the male members. In the Arab region, the family is society in miniature<sup>[1]</sup>. Whether educated or uneducated, across the region is quite difficult, as they are challenged by societies that have no established societal roles for them and that assign value to a woman as a wife and mother, but not as a person<sup>[5]</sup>.

As expat women, we acquiesce to their rules. We do not drive, we cover our bodies with the black cloak (abaya), and we sit in the "Family Section" of the restaurants ('Men Only' sections are for the singles). We become "dependents", hereon "sponsored" by our husbands, who are in turn sponsored by their companies, and we cannot leave the country without an exit visa. Riyadh is the most conservative city of Saudi Arabia. And in the current environment here, expats are well advised to be conservative as well.

According to the Encyclopedia of Human Rights, two "key" conservative Islamic "concepts" that curtail women's rights in Saudi are<sup>[2]</sup>

- sex segregation, justified under the Sharia (Islamic law) legal notion of 'shielding from corruption' (dar al-fasaad), and
- women's alleged 'lack of capacity' (adam al-kifaa'ah) which is the basis of the necessity of a male guardian (mahram) whose permission must be granted for travel, medical procedures, obtaining permits, etc.

The Saudi government is saying one thing to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva but doing another thing inside the kingdom," said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch.

Going out with friends seems to be a male-only form of pleasure and it is next to impossible to get to know the neighbours in the city. Expat home makers are mostly cooped up in the apartment, very bored, lonely and home-sick.

The stifling heat and lack of cultural activities drive people into malls, encouraging endless shopping for clothes that would go under an abaya anyway. Fitting rooms in boutiques are nonexistent, so taking the same item in different sizes and returning the ill-fitting ones is the shopping norm. Life stops during Salah (prayer time). The prayer times were the hardest to get used to. Shops close five times a day during prayer times, sometimes 25 minutes or longer. These details may all seem unbearable, but it's the price we pay for the tax-free earnings and for the experience gained.

Saudi Arabia is a security conscious country. Human Rights Watch recently said Saudi authorities are expanding a crackdown on people who criticise the government online.<sup>[6]</sup> This country is not at war but as long as you abide to their rules and regulations for foreign females (expat women). For a female you must always remain covered when you are out and about in the city, i.e.: shopping, dining out, etc. Usually women go out with their families or a group of female friends or relatives. Mixed social functions occur within compounds premises or behind closed doors, not in public. As far sports are concern for women, it is done within the huge compounds, there are shopping malls, parks, private women-only spas, or private beach resorts specially for women. You will never see a woman jogging, riding a bike, or jet skiing in public.

*There were high walls around homes, Saudi and expat women should not go out with their men socially* restrictions can be frustrating and cause feelings of helplessness and homesickness. Restrictions on mingling between unrelated members of the opposite sex remain severe. Expat woman may enjoy a life that very much resembles the one she had back home, with parties, concerts or plays, and social events with friends or the expat community within the premises of the home which is surrounded by tall walls and

gnarls of barbed wire. Children's park in the evening, the only time to venture beyond the air-conditioned houses is another enjoyment.

### Conclusion

Today, Saudi Arabia is trying to take a few more steps ahead—starting a co-ed university King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), initiating metro lines in Riyadh, (Makkah Mass Rail Transit) is already in vogue, letting women sell

lingerie to women, even toning down the public beheadings. One cannot change things here, so one has to go with the ebb and flow of the currents. As the quote goes “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” the views of the expat community is like two sides of the same coin it may be affirmative or negative, it depends according to the individual's vision of the world.

### References:

1. Daketi Srinivas, Role of Women in The Profession of Architecture; Human Rights International Research Journal : ISSN 2320-6942 Volume 1 Issue 1 (2013), Pg 308-312
2. Barakat, Halim. “The Arab World: Society, culture and state.” 1993.
3. <http://sites.duke.edu/dukeinarabworld/2012/06/24/behind-the-veil-the-rights-of-women-in-the-arab-world/>
4. [http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Summary\\_Report\\_A\\_GENERATION\\_ON\\_THE\\_MOVE\\_AUB\\_IFI\\_UNICEF\\_MENARO\\_.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Summary_Report_A_GENERATION_ON_THE_MOVE_AUB_IFI_UNICEF_MENARO_.pdf)
5. D.Ratnamani, K.F.Hemalatha Vijaya Raja Kumar, M.V.K.Srivani, History of Woman Education and Importance of Woman; Human Rights International Research Journal : ISSN 2320-6942 Volume 2 Issue 1 (2014), Pg 15-17
6. <http://americanbedu.com/2009/05/02/perspectives-of-an-expat-woman-in-saudi-arabia/>
7. Brotman, sam et. al. Implementing CEDAW in North Africa and the Middle East: Roadblocks and Victories. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 2008.
8. Priyamakhija, Kavita Nagpal & Dr Leena James, Conflicts Are Disagreements That Lead ; Human Rights International Research Journal : ISSN 2320-6942 Volume 1 Issue 2 (2013), Pg 415-422
9. <http://www.thecultureist.com/2012/12/12/expat-women-in-saudi-arabia-compound/>
10. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2013/12/01/Who-is-better-off-in-Saudi-Arabia-An-expat-or-a-Saudi-woman-.html>
11. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's\\_rights\\_in\\_Saudi\\_Arabia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's_rights_in_Saudi_Arabia)

### Mirunalini .P.

Research Scholar, Research and Development Centre,  
Bharathiar University, Coimbatore [mirunalinioprakasham@gmail.com](mailto:mirunalinioprakasham@gmail.com)

### Dr. Ramani

Research Supervisor and Sr. Professor,  
VIT University, Vellore [ramaninaidu@gmail.com](mailto:ramaninaidu@gmail.com)