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Saudi Arabia, Factor 15: Human Rights

### **Saudi Arabia: Women Farmers**

Women in America may face some inequalities but they also have many privileges that are unknown to women in certain third world countries. Women in America vote, compete freely in sports, drive cars, go places without a chaperone, and are simply able to interact with men. Some third world countries do not allow women that much freedom. Because third world countries such as Saudi Arabia limit resources for women, the country often struggles with poverty and food insecurity as well. Women actually have a big impact on food security and agricultural production. By allowing women to have greater access to farmland, countries can increase their profit and food production. Both men and women are important in helping to stop hunger and poor nutrition. Saudi Arabia's culture often makes it difficult for women to obtain government or business positions as well as resources for farming. Without the support from government leaders and Saudi laws, women will continue to struggle with gaining more rights. Traditions and norms are being challenged but women in Saudi Arabia and other third world countries may still need help from other, outside organizations and programs. There are many programs that exist and are being developed to help women gain equal rights. With the help of these programs, women across the world can stand on the same level as men. Women in Saudi Arabia can gain access to farmland and the resources needed to make a farm successful. While Saudi Arabia and several other countries struggle with granting equality to women, it is important for every country to help end food insecurity and poor nutrition. If supporting gender equality decreases food insecurity and poor nutrition, then that is an important step for every country to take.

#### Life in Saudi Arabia:

Family membership in Saudi Arabia revolves around the father. Fathers are the authority figures. Families are generally composed of the father, his children, and his grandchildren. Because marriage is simply a civil contract, married women are incorporated into the husband's household but not the family. Women continue on as a member of the family of their birth. Saudi men are allowed to marry up to four women. Divorce is a common practice in Saudi Arabia ("Cultural Homogeneity and Values").

Saudi Arabia has a vast network of both hospitals and schools. The general public receives free health care, which includes complex procedures such as organ transplants and open-heart surgery. Education is required for both men and women in Saudi Arabia. Females make up half of the six million students enrolled at schools and universities. The education system consists of 30,000 schools, 52 universities, and a large number of colleges and other institutions. Education, including books, is free for the students. Islam is at the center of the education system ("About Saudi Arabia").

Because of Saudi Arabia's intense agricultural development, there has been a growth in the production of all basic foods. They are self-sufficient in a number of foodstuffs, which allows for a wide variety in the diet of the people ("About Saudi Arabia"). Wheat, rice, and yogurt are common in meals as well as chicken, lamb, milk, and other milk products. The people of Saudi Arabia consume large amounts of chicken and were the fifth largest importers of lamb and mutton in 2008. Due to Islamic belief, pork is not consumed in the country. Sheep, goat, and camel milk are used in common recipes. They are also used in the production of butter, yogurt, and cheese. Tea and coffee are frequently consumed beverages ("Saudi Arabian Cuisine"). Dates were once a staple in the diet but are now grown primarily for global aid ("About Saudi Arabia").

### Farming and Agriculture:

Saudi Arabia only receives four inches of rain each year but farmers have managed to turn the desert land into agricultural fields through complex irrigation systems. Farmers use water from annual floods as well as runoff from the fields. The Ministry of Agriculture is responsible for the agricultural policy in Saudi Arabia. Government programs offer “long-term, interest-free loans, technical and support services, and incentives such as free seeds and fertilizers, low-cost water, fuel and electricity, and duty-free imports of raw materials and machinery.” The government programs have helped to expand and develop agriculture in the country (“About Saudi Arabia”). Development is quite diverse however. Farm sizes in Saudi Arabia vary greatly depending on the operation and the commodities being produced (Ludgate).

Saudi Arabia has become self-sufficient in producing meat, milk, and eggs. While successful dairy farms allow them to export dairy products, the country also exports dates, wheat, eggs, poultry, fish, fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Improvements in aquaculture and fish farms have allowed for more profit in that area as well. Grain production has decreased due to water worries (“About Saudi Arabia”).

### Barriers:

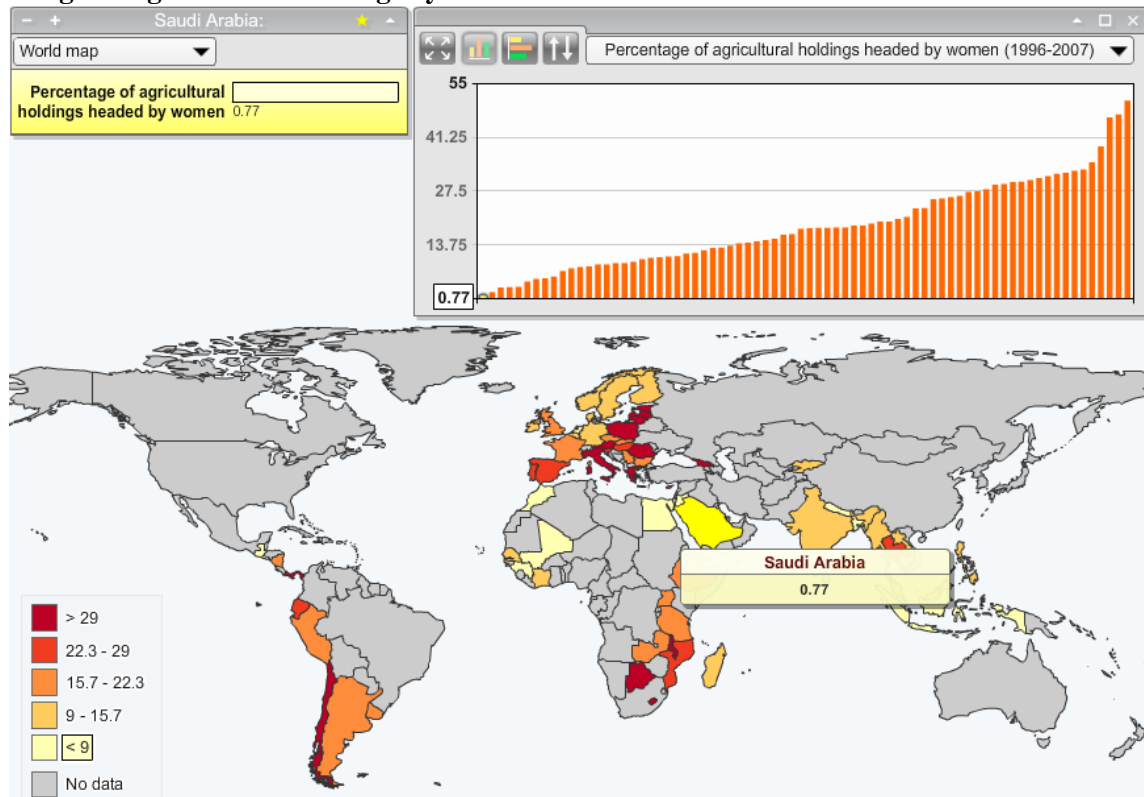
There are many barriers that Saudi families face. Water is one of the biggest agricultural challenges. Four inches of rain each year creates a challenge for farmers. Irrigation systems do help the problem but they don’t solve it. Some products such as grain are being produced less because of the amount of water they require (“About Saudi Arabia”). In fact, Saudi Arabia has become the largest importer of barley worldwide and is expected to be one of the largest importers of wheat by 2025 (“Agriculture Market Insight”). Feeling the pressure to conserve water, the Minister of Agriculture stopped all wheat production by the early months of 2016 (Muhammad). To help ease worries, the Saudi government has capitalized on land in both California and Arizona. Alfalfa hay is produced in the U.S. and shipped back to Saudi’s growing number of dairy farms. While not all Americans are happy, the relationship solves one of Saudi Arabia’s many water related barriers (Daniels).

Traditional values of freedom in the U.S. are often unknown to citizens of other countries. The people of Saudi Arabia do not experience freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or freedom of the press. Media throughout the country is under the control of the government, therefore restricting citizen’s abilities to challenge the norm (“Saudi Arabia” SpringForward). The government also prohibits the practice of any religion other than Islam (“Issues”).

Gender inequalities are often apparent in the society as well. There are two principal ways in which gender inequality is measured. First is the United Nations’ Gender Inequality Index (GII). The GII focuses on labor market participation, reproductive health, and empowerment of women. Between 2011 and 2013, Saudi Arabia “achieved significant improvements based on investments in women’s health and education.” However, the Arab states as a whole received .546 “due mostly to worsening of women’s reproductive health and early childbearing” (Ludgate). Using the GII’s scale from 1 to 0 indicates .546 (a higher number) as a higher rate of inequality. A second measure of gender inequality is the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI). In contrast to the GII, the GGGI focuses on progress toward closing the gender gap as well as economic participation. The GGGI’s scale is just the opposite of the GII’s. A number closer to one indicated a lower rate of inequality. In 2013 the GGGI ranked 136 countries. Saudi Arabia received the tenth lowest score (Ludgate). Limits on women land ownership and farming causes a big nutritional barrier in Saudi Arabia. Women head only .77% of all agricultural holdings in Saudi Arabia; a percentage considerably lower than that of other countries (Image 1) (“Female Landholders”). Across the world, women can and do play a large roll in agriculture and

nutrition; therefore, limiting that role can cause food insecurity and decreased nutrition ("Securing Women's Land...").

**Image 1: Agricultural Holdings by Women**



Source: "Female Landholders." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. FAO. Web. 15 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.fao.org/economic/es-policybriefs/multimedia0/female-land-ownership/en/>>.

#### Women Farmers:

There are many different roles that women play throughout agriculture. In most Muslim majority countries "women are key players in most agricultural productions systems, although their role dissipates as agricultural production leaves the farm gate." In Saudi Arabia, women plant, weed, harvest, pack, and store crops. Some women may also help with the farm animals or process and market for fisheries (Ludgate). Women also play similar roles in the agriculture of other Muslim majority countries (Image 2).

However, both the law and culture in Saudi Arabia make it difficult for women to obtain land. "The 1992 Basic Law of Saudi Arabia does not guarantee gender equality." Equality in Saudi Arabia is based off of Sharia law, in which women are considered legal minors. Women are under the authority of their fathers ("Saudi Arabia" Social Institutions...) In the Saudi culture, the men are the authority figures and providers ("Cultural Homogeneity and Values"). Men work and own land. Many women do not (Abu-Nasr). An entire culture is difficult to change; many Saudi government leaders are unwilling to change the traditional male dominance. New legislation or policies are often overridden by tradition because the legislation is unable to change the attitudes of an entire population. It is often difficult for women to improve their social and economic status because they have limited rights to land. Access to land can lead to participation in elections or schools as well as access to technological inputs and training, and credit

opportunities ("Improving Gender Equity...") Securing property rights for women may lead to an even greater increase in productivity. "In other words, if a woman is confident that no-one can take her land from her, she will be more likely to invest resources into it that will guarantee a higher return over a longer period of time" (Wragg). Overall, securing rights to land and better access to land can lead to higher dignity, security, self-esteem, and confidence for women ("Improving Gender Equity...").

**Image 2: Gender Roles in Muslim Majority Countries**

Agricultural System	Countries	Gender Roles	Livelihood	Poverty Prevalence
Irrigated-large scale	Egypt, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	Women: planting, weeding, harvesting, packing, storing Men: irrigation, input supply & marketing	Fruits, vegetables, cash crops (cotton, cereals)	Limited in some countries but extensive in others
Irrigated small-scale	Characteristic to most MMCs	Women: planting, weeding, harvesting, packing. In addition, small ruminants and poultry Men: irrigation, input supply & marketing	Farm-based	Moderate
Highland mixed	Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Yemen	Same as above for men and women. In addition for women: provision of firewood, fodder & water	Cereals, legumes, sheep, off-farm work	Extensive
Rainfed mixed	Algeria, Indonesia, Iraq, Malaysia, Morocco, Syria, Turkey	Women: home gardens, harvesting, food processing, off-farm work (small scale marketing) Men: input supply & marketing	Tree crops, cereals, legumes, rice, off-farm work	Moderate (for small farmers)
Dryland mixed	Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia	Women: livestock care, milking, fodder preparation Men: marketing, off-farm work	Cereals, sheep, off-farm work	Extensive for small farmers
Pastoral	Algeria, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia	Women: livestock care, milking, fodder preparation, fodder & water provision Men: marketing, off-farm work	Sheep, goat, barley, off-farm work	Extensive for small herders
Sparse (arid)	Algeria, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Sub-Saharan countries, Tunisia	Women: support men in animal husbandry Men: animal breeding, off-farm work	Camel, sheep, off-farm work	Limited Extensive (in Sub-Saharan Africa)
Coastal artisan fishing	All coastal countries in Africa and Asia	Women: processing & marketing Men: fishing	Fishing, off-farm work	Moderate
Urban agriculture	Across all MMCs except Gulf States	Women: subsistence Men: commercial	Horticulture, poultry, off-farm work	Limited

Source: Ludgate, Nargiza. "Muslim Women in Agricultural Education and the Labor Force." Office of International Research, Education, and Development. Virginia Tech, May 2015. Web. 21 July 2016. <[http://www.oired.vt.edu/innovate/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/InnovATE\\_Muslim-Women-in-AET6-15-15Final.pdf](http://www.oired.vt.edu/innovate/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/InnovATE_Muslim-Women-in-AET6-15-15Final.pdf)>.

The Effects:

Saudi Arabia is a country of hidden poverty and the problem continues to grow. Between two and four million people live in poverty in Saudi Arabia. Some government leaders have tried to make changes but the growing population makes solutions hard to come by (Sullivan). With poverty comes food insecurity and poor nutrition. Women could be the solution ("Securing Women's Land..."). Women are responsible for sixty to eighty percent of all food production ("Women, Land Tenure..."). With more resources and

better access to land, women could produce twenty to thirty percent more food for farms (“Securing Women’s Land...”). Food insecurity would decrease, overall nutrition would rise, and families would simply have more food and money (“Securing Women’s Land...”; “Women, Land Tenure...”).

#### Other Major Issues:

While water scarcity is a constant problem in Saudi Arabia, the growing population also creates problems. Saudi Arabia is predicted to grow seventy-seven percent by 2050 (Lippman). A larger population means more people to feed, clothe, and provide jobs for. Saudi Arabia’s growing population has led to an increase in poverty. The government is unable to combat the poverty problem because of the rapid growth (Sullivan). Importing and import partners have created problems for Saudi Arabia as well. Because of high international food prices and a large amount of food imports, domestic prices in Saudi Arabia have experienced growing inflation. Climate change also affects prices due to flooding and droughts. Saudi Arabia has import relationships that are not always stable or reliable. Black Sea and South Asian exporters like Pakistan, India, Ukraine, and Russia experience more fluctuation due to climate change and export bans. Countries such as Kazakhstan and Russia are important producers but they often take their trading relations to growing markets such as those in China. Another environmental problem that Saudi Arabia faces is overexploitation of fisheries. While fishing practices have become more widely used, the Red Sea and the Gulf are highly susceptible to pollution, habitat degradation, and loss of species. Their comparatively small size and low circulation levels may be factors for the vulnerability of the two bodies of water (“Global Food Insecurity...”).

#### Islam and Making a Change:

The Saudi government could play a large role in equality and landownership for women. Under the rule of King Abdullah between 2005 and 2015, women’s rights increased in Saudi Arabia. The King granted women the right to vote, allowed women to compete in the Olympics, created job opportunities for women, and even named thirty women to his 150 member advisory body. Participating in government and other business positions increased women’s roles and rights in the country (Abu-Nasr). Unfortunately, not every Saudi king values women as much as King Abdullah did. While there is little hope in Abdullah’s successor King Salman, Salman’s son Muhammad could be a key step towards equality. Muhammad “says he is anxious to increase Saudi productivity, and to lower birth-rates, by getting women out of the home and into the workplace. But even so he seems nervous of confronting the religious establishment, on whom the Al Saud rulers depend for legitimacy” (Jeddah and Riyadh). Thus the true solution lies with Islam.

Islam’s holy book, the Qur’an “says everyone should strive to overcome selfishness and treat others fairly” (“What Are Human Rights?”). The Qur’an also commends women such as the wife of Pharaoh, the Virgin Mary, and Queen of Sheba who held a high political position by running her country (Bakhtiar). Muhammad, a crucial figure in Islam and the person to whom the Qur’an was revealed said that “people were equal and should not be judged by their gender, colour or race, but by their faith and piety” (“What Are Human Rights?”). Although the holy book and a key figure of Islam support equality, the Saudi government continues to struggle with gender inequality. While Islam’s holy book may reference men as being superior to women, it does not say that women have different rights than men (Bakhtiar). Women still have the right to own property, the right to decide whether to wear a hijab, and the right to be free from oppression (Bakhtiar; Stacey). “The oppression does not come from Islam, but from laws made, in many cases by Muslim men.” Inequality in the religion is often due to various interpretations and laws that are made (Bakhtiar). Sharia law (developed by teachings from the Qur’an) and civil law together create a gender gap (Ludgate). Forty-eight Muslim majority countries allow women to drive but Saudi Arabia does not. Some Muslim majority countries like Saudi Arabia require hijabs while other do not. Both differences show that each interpretation can lead to an increase or decrease in

inequality (Bakhtiar). “In the new, more conservative environment, perhaps the best hope for women is that the country might rediscover its own traditions” (Jeddah and Rliyadh).

Women and men in Saudi Arabia can challenge the government to take an active role in finding a solution for the gender gap. The first way they can do so is by creating women’s rights organizations. The Association for the Protection and Defense of Women’s Rights in Saudi Arabia is one such example. The organization has several goals for equality. While the group’s campaigns have been ignored by the government, they can still create a common goal which would lead to more voices, therefore demanding that the leaders of the country make a change (“Association for the Protection...”). Women in Muslim majority countries can also work to learn about their own rights. If women know about the rights that the Qur’an gives them, then they can join together to create a movement (Bakhtiar). In countries such as Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, and Turkey, those movements are occurring. Women are starting to challenge the norm. An appetite for equality and further participation in those countries positively affects women throughout Saudi Arabia. In 2013, women involved in women’s rights organizations challenged the ban on driving in Saudi Arabia (Ludgate). Finally, Muslim women can use their knowledge about their religion to challenge the government and the norms it created. By using the Qur’an, women can demand a revision in the conservative interpretations of Islamic governments (Ludgate).

Moving towards gender equality requires traditions that have long stood to be changed or eliminated altogether. However, a change in traditions does not entail abandonment of an entire culture. Islam is and can still be at the center of Saudi Arabia’s rich culture. The religion structures and defines life in the country but it can continue to do so without impacting the rights of women. Saudi’s government can interpret Islam in a way that encourages equality in sharia and civil law. The government can also learn from other Muslim majority countries that are paving the way for a new and exciting future.

#### Other Solutions:

There are several other programs that can help women gain access to land. The first one is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Gates Foundation understands the impact that women can have on agriculture. Farms are more productive, new technology adoption increases, and family health improves with women working on farms. Yields and agriculture output increase as well with women farmers. Programs developed through the Gates Foundation offer personalized solutions for each woman. With the help of grantees and partners, the Gates Foundation gets to know the women by investigating their “...needs, constraints, responsibilities, and priorities and anticipate how programs will affect women’s labor, time, current practices, and resources.” Each program that is developed uses the information to help the women in the best ways possible. The programs include active involvement from the women. The Gates Foundation collects feedback and measures the results of the programs. If the Foundation is not satisfied with the results, the program is altered to further benefit the women. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have different types of programs. Gender transformative programs work toward gender equity and transform the relationships between men and women. Gender awareness programs consider how both sexes will participate and benefit. Finally, gender-neutral programs do not consider how initiatives will benefit or hinder either sex (“Agricultural Development”).

A second program for Saudi women is KIVA. KIVA offers loans to men and women in third world countries. People lend money to the men and women. Lenders choose a borrower from a number of stories and a loan is made to the borrower. Eventually the borrower pays the money back to the lender (“Female Landholders”). This program could help Saudi women gain the resources needed for landownership but it would not help to combat the cultural challenges that women still face in Saudi Arabia.

Women's Microfinance Initiative is a program similar to KIVA. Bank officials go to third world countries and set up loan accounts for women. The women go through a loan program and eventually graduate from Women's Microfinance Initiative. The women use the loans to create businesses and improve their living. Women's Microfinance Initiative is currently a working program in Africa ("Welcome to Women's..."). The program could easily be used in Saudi Arabia though. Women could use the loans to gain the resources and farmland needed to combat food insecurity and poor nutrition.

World Vision is a different, child-focused, program. World Vision uses a four-step process to improve third world communities. First, World Vision's staff listens to children, churches, and community leaders to determine the problems that the community faces. A five-year action plan is developed for the community. Next the plan is put into action. Revisions are made as necessary. Finally, the community members are trained to make the plan successful without World Vision. World Vision's staff transitions out and the community works to sustain itself ("How We Work"). While the community and child-focused World Vision program may work in Saudi Arabia, it could also be altered to better help women. The first step could involve listening to the women and determining what challenges they face. The following steps would then be developed to further improve the lives of Saudi women as farmers and businesswomen.

Saudi Arabia is a country with a well-developed society. Both the health care and education systems are intricate and expansive. Agriculture in the country is also developing at a constant rate. Recent developments such as dairy farms and aquaculture continue to grow. There are barriers that Saudi farms and families face however. With a limited amount of rain come challenges in agriculture and nutrition. Irrigation, strategic expansion overseas, and a few production cuts help keep water related barriers under wraps. Citizens do continue to face barriers due to governmental restrictions. The media and religion are kept under close watch. One of the biggest challenges that Saudi Arabia faces is the high rate of gender inequality. Women are so important in agriculture and the fight to end hunger and malnutrition. Saudi women could increase the overall food production in the country if they were given more access to land and other agricultural technologies. However, traditions and the norm keep food production down, poverty rates high, and a growing population with malnutrition worries. While Islamic interpretations currently increase the number of problems, citizens throughout Saudi Arabia could challenge the government to make changes. Women have many rights in the religion that can and should be taken advantage of. Changing traditions may cause some Saudi citizens to worry about the culture, but the changing traditions do not mean that the culture itself will change. Saudi Arabia will continue to flourish even through any modifications. Programs like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, KIVA, WMI, and World Vision are important stepping-stones for women and communities in third world countries. Those programs and many more can help gain resources for women farmers and businesswomen. Without the leaders who have developed those programs, hunger and malnutrition would be an even larger problem. By solving problems like gender inequality, the world can also solve malnutrition. Only with strong leadership and successful innovation can the world hope to end hunger.

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