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Saudi Women in the Battle for Equality: A Friend or Foe?

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A recent article in the Washington Post titled "Saudi women rise in defense of the veil" (June 1) highlights a rarely discussed issue in the drive for emancipation of women in Saudi Arabia. The report, like many others that appeared in the last few years in Western print and video news outlets, confirms that a significant number of Saudi women steadfastly oppose serious attempts to reverse a decades-old policy that continues to plague our country. Many Saudi men, myself included, share with our nation's women a vision for building a benevolent future society that treats all humans as free and equal. It is, therefore, quite perplexing to learn of the zeal and audacity with which a few highly educated and well-off Saudi women turn a blind eye to the current state of women's civil rights and, worse, back a pernicious sociopolitical policy aimed at suppression and exclusion of all women.

What kind of oppression is now being experienced by women in Saudi Arabia? Just who is culpable in the exclusion and marginalization of women? Who is the vocal minority that dismisses women's aspirations and denounces their call for liberation? Are we to continue to excuse, let alone apologize for, those self-loathing and self-destructive women for voicing such utter nonsense to a worldly audience even when granted anonymity by the foreign reporter? These questions warrant a serious inquiry by all parties concerned, lest we are forced to recast our old suspicions. God may forgive those unwary among us for they know not what they have done.

To be sure, the women interviewed in the Post article cited many reasons for their choice to support a veiling policy. The reasons cited ranged from merely exercising a personal choice to embracing an innate drive to adhere to conservative Islamic mores even though these supposed mores are not practiced by a majority of Muslim women throughout the world. This women-driven counter-reform advocacy strongly suggests that it would be a grave error to think of Saudi women as a homogenous and undifferentiated mass possessive of a unified vision for social aspirations. Further, it flies in the face of recent, much needed developments on the civil rights front in Saudi Arabia where a few and brave women reformers are working up an advocacy campaign in print media demanding that a male-dominated society grant equal rights and personal freedom to women. This revealing disparity points to a nefarious aspect of women's rights movement in Saudi Arabia.

It is becoming increasingly clear that a reform initiative cannot be meaningfully expected to reverse the tides of social apartheid if it continues to operate under the general premise that the malfeasance of men is all that hinders progressive developments in women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Women reformers in Saudi Arabia must seriously look inward to understand exactly what is keeping a significant segment of the oppressed women population from taking active part in the ongoing battle for equity. This is not necessarily limited to women who inexplicably choose to remain idle or indifferent to transgression of men; however, it aims squarely at those women who wickedly suppress emancipation of other women by pandering to a pernicious, fundamentalist social policy. Women reformers must genuinely address the possibility that a significant and influential segment of Saudi women are culpable, knowingly or unwittingly, in the demise of women's own civil rights status. There is little evidence to suspect that the perfidious disposition taken by the women interviewed by the Post is a direct result of oppression and dominance by the male segment of society.

Could it be true that the women opposed to reform represent a larger segment of Saudi society that is alienated and threatened by the emergence of globalization, a culture of personal choice,

consumerism, and developments in workplace that bring other women face-to-face with their husbands and sons?

Might it be possible that those women have no concept of civil rights or what it means to be an empowered, active woman participant in a society that feels increasingly under pressure to become cosmopolitan? If the answer is yes then that certainly would be a tragedy. A bigger tragedy would be for women reformers to continue to think naively that the empowerment of women will become real only when men choose to grant it out of their own will.

History teaches that the greatest human endeavors to right social ills, whether it is the ending of slavery or the defeat of communism, occurred only after revolt among the oppressed reached a critical mass in articulating collective thoughts and common goals.

There is a strong and unequivocal need for women reformers in Saudi Arabia to frame a new and vigorous debate on women rights that takes into account the dubious complicity of Saudi women in excluding fellow women from effective participation in public life. Precisely, transformation of feminist activism into social reforms is necessarily about getting some women to recognize that all fellow women are equal to men in the first place, and then to lead those women seeking empowerment to achieve it through self-betterment and civil enlightenment. To do otherwise is at best a grave disservice to civil rights reforms and at worst hypocrisy and a betrayal of every woman in Saudi Arabia.

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