

Recent reform of Saudi Arabia and its  
consequences on women's status\*  
- Approached from the citizenship right -

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**Recent reform of Saudi Arabia and its consequences on  
women's status  
- Approached from the citizenship right -**

Saudi Arabia has been known as one of the most conservative countries in the world in terms of women's rights in citizenship. But it has started to implement various reform policies since King Abdullah's accession to power in 2005. The recent reform policy toward women, however, had led to controversial debates among the religious authority and political parties, as well as scholars and ordinary Saudi people in terms of various spectrums of the religious and political, the modern and traditional, and Islamic and western. Taking the current Saudi women's situation into consideration, this article analyzes Saudi Arabia's recent reform policy toward women from the citizenship's point of view. There has been various research about women in the Middle East, but relatively few studies have dealt with Saudi women compared to women of other countries. This is mainly because Saudi society has very restrictive and rigid environment for conducting any research, especially under

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the situation that women's issues are regarded as a sensitive subject, if not taboo. Therefore, recognizing difficulties of conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia in a practical level, this study mainly relies on literature review as a main source of research and will compare women's citizenship rights before and after the introduction of King Abdullah's reform policy in terms of civil, political and social perspectives.

**[Key Words : Saudi Arabia, Women, Reform, King Abdullah, Citizenship right]**

## I . Introduction

'Reform' has been a buzzword within Saudi Arabia since King Abdullah's succession in 2005 following the death of his half-brother King Fahd. King Abdullah's reform was initiated not only by economic reason for preparation of the Post-Oil era and nationalization of labor force. But it has also been propelled by other internal and external political factors such as Arab Spring and its aftermath in 2011 as well as pressure from international organizations.

Among the various schemes introduced by the reform policy, women's issues have taken the central part of it, and caused controversial debates among the Saudi people. Saudi people perceive women as a reservoir of traditional authentic Islamic culture as well as its transmitter to the next generation. In other words, women are viewed for Saudi people as a 'cultural womb' that preserve pure national identity, therefore, should be kept inside in order not to be contaminated by outside's influence. Therefore, Saudi government, which has been supported Wahabism as its founding national ideology, has adhered to conservative policies toward their local women under the name of protection. Unfortunately, however, excessive protection policy has brought discrimination against women, creating a



'marginalized minority' within Saudi society.

There are several examples of Wahabi's conservative interpretation of Shariah, Islamic law and its implementation into ordinary Saudi women's life. For example, Saudi women are not allowed to move freely without male guardian's permission and they should be accompanied by their male kin. Saudi women are also excluded from exercising political rights of suffrage as they are regarded as sensitive subject rather than logical and reasonable one. Saudi women also cannot drive a car and are unable to pass their nationality to their children. In order to materialize Islamic religious ideology of gender segregation into reality, Saudi women are only allowed to work and study in the place where men are not present.

The recent reform policy toward women, however, had led to controversial debates among the religious authority and political parties, as well as scholars and ordinary Saudi people in terms of various spectrums of the religious and political, the modern and traditional, and Islamic and western. Taking the current Saudi women's situation into consideration, this article analyzes Saudi Arabia's recent reform policy toward women from the citizenship's point of view. There has been various research about women in the Middle East, but relatively few studies have dealt with Saudi women compared to women of other countries. This is mainly because Saudi society has very restrictive and rigid environment for conducting any research, especially under the situation that women's issues are regarded as a sensitive subject, if not taboo.

Therefore, recognizing difficulties of conducting fieldwork in Saudi Arabia in a practical level, this study mainly relies on literature review as a main source of research and will compare women's citizenship rights before and after the introduction of King Abdullah's reform policy, especially focusing on civil, political and social perspectives. It is also worth of mentioning that even though Wahabism is significant in terms of understanding the history of Saudi women and their social



status, this study does not include analysis of the stance of Wahabism towards women in this paper as it goes beyond the scope of the study.

Among the previous works on the issues of Saudi women and their citizenship concerned, Altorky' s work, entitled 'The Concept and Practice of Citizenship in Saudi Arabia (2000)' is similar to this study. However, as it was written before the fundamental reform of King Abdullah in 2005, this current article has its significance in terms of updating the current data within the academic field.

## II. Conceptualization of citizenship in Saudi Arabia

### 1. Conceptualization of citizenship in general context

The concept of citizenship, as a western creation of late 18th and the early 19th century, regulates not only the relations of 'contract-making individual person' to the nation-state, but also the people within the sovereign territory. Referring to the 'individual person' in its general context to both man and woman, the constitutions of most countries recognize both genders as a legally, politically, socially equal and independent entity. T. H. Marshall has defined the classical definition of citizenship in the western society as follows,

(Citizenship has) three parts, or elements, civil, political, and social. The civil elements is composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom - liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice...the intuitions most directly associated with the civil rights are the courts of justice. By the political element, I mean the right to participate in the exercise of political power as a member of a body invested with political



authority or as an elector of the members of such a body. The corresponding institutions are parliament and councils of local government. By the social elements, I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society. The institutions most closely connected with it are the educational system and the social services (requoted in Altorki 2000, 217)

Giving a clear example of citizenship in distinct arenas of 'rights' , Charrad also has distinguished citizenship in terms of civil, political, and social perspective.

'Civil' rights of citizenship generally associated with nationality rights and its central issue concerns transmitting citizenship rights to their children or foreign spouse, while social arena of citizenship right concerns basic personal rights as defined in family and personal status law. It covers the law regulating issues such as marriage, divorce, and guardianship of children. Lastly, the issues of political arena of citizenship rights entail some of the basic regulations enumerated in the constitution, including suffrage rights (2000, 73).

If the concept of citizenship, mentioned above, is reflected in Saudi women, it is difficult for Saudi women to be located within the three different arenas of civil, political and social rights separately as the issues are interwoven and crossed in everyday life. Or, it is even in vain to distinguish as they are deprived of basic human rights. Nonetheless, if it is roughly tried, issues of nationality law, restriction of free movement, guardianship fall into a realm of civil rights of citizenship, whereas absence of voting rights to political rights of citizenship, and lastly, segregation culture in the public space and its collateral limitation to participation in the labor force into social rights of citizenship.

According to Joseph (2000) who has discussed gender and citizenship matters



within the larger regional, religious, cultural, and political frame in the Middle East, citizenship in the region is a highly 'gendered enterprise' in which men and women have experienced citizenship in a difference manner, if it has not discriminated and marginalized women under the patriarchal social structure. Highlighting on 'gendered aspect of citizenship,' Joseph has explored privileging of masculine blood in citizenship succession from the parents' nationality to their children, patriarchal centered family law system in which men upheld the ownership over their wife and children. In addition, unlike the constitution of most western states, there is a tendency for most Middle Eastern countries to define the basic unit of society as the family, not an individual person and assert the state as the protector of the family. Therefore, the state plays a role in reinforcing the patriarchal family structure (Joseph 2000, 15). In the same line, Zubaida had alleged the masculinization of citizenship where men and women are empowered and disempowered under the patriarch social system in the Middle Eastern countries (requoted in Joseph 2000, 4).

As a result, in most Middle Eastern society, women have not been recognized as a part of the people and lacked civil, political, and social meaning of personhood in their respective countries. Saudi Arabia is not an exemption in terms of recognizing male privileged concept of citizenship. In order to discuss the concept of citizen and their rights and duties, the constitution of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would be the primary starting point.

## **2. Development of citizenship in Saudi Arabia viewed from the Basic Law**

Saudi Arabia does not have a formal constitution in the standard meaning of that term. The legal system of Saudi Arabia is based on *Shariah*, Islamic law, derived



mainly from the Quran and the Sunnah, the traditions of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. However, in March 1992, King Fahd had issued several decrees outlining the basic statutes of government and codifying for the first time to supplement *Shariah* for covering modern issues of citizenship, family issues, health care and welfare. To the extent that the Basic Law can be considered an 'informal' constitution, <Article I> establishes the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet Mohammed as the 'formal' constitution.

Basic Law <Article 9> declares the basic value of the Saudi society in which, family is described as the central unit of the society, rather than individual personhood.

The family is the nucleus of Saudi Society. Members of the family shall be raised in the Islamic Creed, which demands allegiance and obedience to God, to His Prophet and to the rulers, respect for and obedience to the laws, and love for and pride in the homeland and its glorious history.

And <Article 10> commits the state to strengthen the bonds of the family as follows,

The State shall aspire to promote family bonds and Arab-Islamic values. It shall take care of all individuals and provide the right conditions for the growth of their talents and skills.

As shown in the Basic Law of Saudi Arabia, neither women nor men are not recognized as an independent individual. It is only recent period when the term 'citizen' or '*muwatini*' in Arabic started to be mentioned by media, official documents, or by regime officials. According to Altorki, it was after the Gulf war



in 1991 when the concept of citizenship among the Saudi nationals, that has close connotation of western definition of citizenship described in Marshall's definition, started to appear in modern Saudi Arabia. The war crystallized certain nascent feelings of patriotism for the territorial state and promoted affiliation among the Saudi nationals alongside religious, family, friendship and business network (2000, 220).

While the concept of citizenship in Saudi Arabia has been burgeoning, however, women still are not regarded as an individual citizen where the family, represented by a male figure, is considered the basic unit of the country. What it means for Saudi women is that it is only through male extension, whether they are father, brother, or husband, that women can access social welfare program, education, social services such as health and transportation. One representative case that shows women's lack of citizenship is the identity card. The Saudi government has allowed women to apply for issuance of her identity card since 2000 under her guardian's permission. However, the identity card, called as '*bitaqat al-usra* (family card)' shows her affiliation to a certain family or patriarch, rather than her own individual identity.

There lies a marriage between Wahabism's conservative and rigid interpretation of Quran and Sunnah as well as Najdi tribal culture behind the background of women's marginalization in Saudi Arabia. Referring to a strict Sunni sect of Islam, Wahabism has provided the basic religious ideology since the formation of Saudi state in the early 20th century in order to unify different tribes within the Arabian Peninsula. Laalaj (2013) argues that "selective and narrow cultural interpretations of Quran reinforces patriarchic and misogynist view toward women and redefine 'Islam in a manner of un-Islamic.'" Ascribing unjust and discriminatory treatment of women within Saudi society, Laalaj criticized women's ban of driving a car, women's compulsory adorning of all-enveloping black attire, and segregation of





public sphere as Wahabi's conservative interpretation of Islam. Laalaj also continues that Wahabi Islam, as a mechanism of political enforcement of religious belief, has reinforced tribal values of family, honor, and patriarchy and political stability of the kingdom. In order to refer to a union of tribalists and Islamists within cities of the modernized nation state, Ghabra has coin a term called 'desertization' (requoted, Ghabra in Al-Mughni and Tereault 2000: 252). By desertization, Ghabra argues for the transfer of the Bedouin desert's customs, traditions, beliefs, dress codes, and mentality into the city.

### III. Women and citizenship in Saudi Arabia and reform after King Abdullah's accession

#### 1. King Abdullah's reform after 2005 and its driving factors

In order to advance women's status after the accession of King Abdullah in 2005 in Saudi Arabia, the King has introduced a number of reforms policy. The reform was initiated from 'top' to 'down', and among many fields, emancipation of women and their education was a remarkable achievement. The reform policy led by King Abdullah' s government includes: introduction of various scholarship programs to encourage thousands of students of both sexes to study in Western universities; opening of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in September 2009 where male and female students can intermix within the campus; registration of the first female trainee lawyer in a situation in which courts are sexually segregated; giving women the right to vote and run as conditions in municipal elections from 2015; giving Saudi nationality to sons and husbands of Saudi women married to



non-Saudis; appointment of 30 women to represent one-fifth of the Shura Council, which advises on new legislation; increase the number of women's employment in the private sector.<sup>1)</sup> Through these reform, Saudi women at least have a slightest hope for making their voice heard within a patriarchal oriented society. In addition, in order to decrease reliance on foreign labor force, the Saudi government also actively encourages their local women to participate in work, providing public transportation system for women and developing women-only industrial city in Hufuf area.

There are various backgrounds behind this reform both from internal and external level. First, as for the internal reason, it was derived not only from the preparation for the Post-Oil era and its following-up policy of labor force localization, so called Saudization. Saudi Arabia has heavily relied on national development by expatriates from Asian and Arab countries especially since the oil boom in the 1970s onwards, as a result of that, currently they comprise 30% of the total labor market in Saudi Arabia.<sup>2)</sup> In order to solve youth unemployment problems and block the outflow of national wealth to outside of their country, Saudi Arabia has introduced moderate level of Saudization policy since 1994 and it has been intensified by implementation of a compulsory Nitaqat system (employment quota system of local people) from 2011. According to the law, a company must employ at least one Saudi national and set the minimum wage not under the 3000 SR which is two times higher than that of a foreign worker.

Apart from the economic factor, the reform also has been derived from the realization of the need to strengthen internal political security especially after the

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1) The number of women employed in the private sector has reportedly doubled due to recent government reforms. Although representing almost 60% of university graduates, women contribute only 16,5% of the workforce (The Australian, April 24 2013).

2) 90% of foreign labor force occupies with private sector, while 10% of local people engaged in the same sector (Han, Ba-Ran and others requoted 2011, 24).



attack of al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) within Saudi territory during 2003-2005 as well as the aftermath of 'Arab Spring' in 2011. The Saudi government feared an overthrow of their government which occurred in the neighbouring countries during the democratic waves of 'Arab Spring'. Therefore, it became a necessary for the Saudi monarchy to block internal agitation and solidify the monarchic political system (Al-Heis 2011).

As for the external motivation, the reform was pursued from Saudi's dire consideration of their global image outside the country. Saudi Arabia has been criticized as one of the most notorious countries in the world in terms of women and their treatment. After joining international organizations such as the United Nations Equal Remuneration Convention, the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the International Labour Organization's Discrimination Convention which all require removal of gender discrimination, Saudi government felt international pressure and it has been accelerated since the 'Arab Spring' incident in 2011.

There have been also 'bottom' to 'top' awakening movement among the Saudi elites to improve Saudi women's status after 2011. Instead of requesting western concept of gender equality, they try to combine Saudi's traditional and Islamic ideology with moderate request of improvement of women's rights. It includes abolishment of guardianship, women's freedom to travel and women's freedom to marry the person of their choice (Wagner 2011). This internal awakening movement among the Saudi elites proclaims that Saudi women are not passive recipients but they are also active fighters against restrictive customs as well as supporters for government reform. In order to eliminate traditional shackles and the custom that is unfavored against women, Saudi women activists recently submitted a petition for allowing women to drive to the King and the Shura council in 2013.



## 2. King Abdullah's reform policy in rights of citizenship

### 1) Civil rights of citizenship

The primary issue related to achievement of citizenship within a state revolves around who is included and who is excluded as a citizen of a state. The Saudi government, like any other Middle Eastern countries, had shown until recently a firm stance in terms of allowing only patrilineal passage to their children. Under this law, a foreign husband married to a Saudi woman and their children are not able to acquire citizenship rights. The background of this discriminatory law came out of preventing the outflow of national wealth to outside of their country and to legitimize national identity based on patrilineal lineage. However, the Saudi Ministry of Labor and the Passport General Department announced recently that Saudi citizenship rights would be granted to children of Saudi women married to foreign men following a new decree. According to this new law, children of a Saudi mother and foreign father will be treated as Saudi citizens in education and medical care and will be included in the Saudization program in the private sector (Alarabiya, 16 Feb 2013).<sup>3)</sup>

Another discriminatory law in addition to the nationality law is the guardianship law, which principally governs women's freedom to move in the public space and restrict their participation in social activities. Guardianship law systematically force women to obtain permission from male kin for legal procedures, education, marriage and travel. From the conservative Saudi perspective, women who preserve Islamic cultural identity and family honor, should be protected and controlled under

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3) According to recent statistics issued by the Saudi Minister of Labor, 1,988 Saudi women married foreign men in 2011—548 from Mecca, 543 from Riyadh, and 490 from the Eastern Province. The report revealed that Yemenis ranked first among foreign men who married Saudi women as their number reached 456, followed by Kuwaitis with 351 marriages, Qataris 247, Syrian 149, Emiratis 124, Egyptians 111, Lebanese 66, and Pakistanis with 46 marriages (Alarabiya, 16 Feb 2013).



strict surveillance. However, in the process of coping with the scheme of nationalization of labor force and utilization of women's labour force, the government, for the first time, is trying to abolish some of the restrictive customs of guardianship law such as: women's participation in the labor market under her guardian's consent; having a representative to conduct business; freedom of movement within the Gulf Cooperation Council States (Alarabiya 19 September 2012). But these advances have been offset by a decree by the Labour Ministry reinstating strict gender segregation provisions which had been removed when the Labour Law was changed in 2005 (Human Rights and Democracy 2012, 2013).

It is also worth noting the paradox in the policy of Saudi Arabia in the guardian system in terms of how supportive the technological development is in playing a negative role of controlling women in Saudi Arabia. A new e-guardianship system was introduced in 2012 and according to it, Saudi women and female dependents who left the country are being automatically reported to their guardian by text-message. This new Saudi policy was criticized by Saudi feminists who argue that the guardianship system is not based upon guardianship but an ownership of women. Another representative and controversial issue related to Saudi women and their freedom to move are related to women's right to drive.<sup>4)</sup> In Saudi Arabia women's driving is completely banned by law. Reasons for the ban are not only women's safety but also allegedly spreading of corruption and adultery which possibly would lead to the ultimate destruction of familial values and society as a whole. Due to the restriction of movement, Saudi women have to hire a foreign driver to commute to work and home, for shopping, and even for emergency situations. Hiring a foreign driver costs two thirds of Saudi women's monthly salary.

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4) The minister of interior, Prince Nayif, issued a law prohibiting women from driving when a group of 47 women made a street protest to defy the ban in Riyadh on 6 November 1990. After the protest, what had been forbidden as a matter of custom became a prohibition under force of law (Altorki 2000, 232).



What makes the situation worse, according to customary law, women and men are not allowed to mix, therefore women must accompany another woman, normally a foreign maid. In order to improve this discriminatory situation, several women, called <Women2Drive>, had made a street protest in July 2011 and they were agitated by the waves of Arab Spring but arrested. Today, there seems to a possibility to discuss women's right to drive in Shura council but the decision whether to allow women to drive or not is still vague (Arabnews 18 March 2013).<sup>5)</sup> Recently, women are allowed to ride a bicycle when they are accompanied by male guardian (Bloomberg, 1 April 2013).

## 2) Political rights of citizenship

Political participation in Saudi Arabia is also severely limited because women are not considered as an independent subject in Saudi Arabia. It is not only women, but also individual adult men are not regarded as a political subject, seeing it is only after 2005 when the right to vote was endowed to Saudi men. Traditionally in Saudi Arabia the relations between the ruler and the ruled are viewed as a protecting 'shepherd' and protected 'flock.' The verse is cited in Quran 4:59 as "O you who believe, obey Allah, obey the Prophet, and those in authority among you." Additionally in Hadith, "You are all shepherds and responsible for your flock. The Imam is a shepherd responsible for his flock. The man is a shepherd responsible for his flock. The woman is a shepherdess in the house of her husband and is answerable to him for her flock." (recited in Altorki 2000, 219). Shortly after

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5) Due to women's ban on drive, Saudi women tend to acquire their driving license from neighbouring countries such as UAE and Bahrain. In neighboring countries like the UAE alone, about 36% of the Saudi female residents, drive their cars. In fact, the driving schools in Dubai have seen a dramatic increase in Saudi women candidates seeking training and licenses and there are about 55 trainees who receive licenses on monthly basis. Also, the Bahraini General Directorate of Traffic has issued more than 6,000 driving licenses to Saudi women in the past two years (Arabnews 18 March 2013)



the municipal council elections in September 2011, the King issued a decree enabling women to participate on the next occasion scheduled in 2015. Granting women the right to vote, women are also allowed to run as candidates in the next local elections.

Another recent epochal reform for Saudi women to political participation includes a recent invitation to the Shura Council in 2013, which is the body that recommend laws to the King. According to the king's decree 30 women are allowed to take seats in Saudi Arabia's ruling body although they are seated in a segregated area according to gender segregation law of Saudi Arabia. Additionally women in Saudi Arabia have been allowed to join the mutawaa (Commission for the protection of Virtue and Prevention of Vice), the aforementioned religious police, for the first time, thus reduction of men's power in strict religious regulations on women.

### **3) Social rights of citizenship**

The social rights of citizenship concern segregation of gender in public space. In order to implement Islamic gender ideology which prevents intermixing of women and men in the ordinary life within Saudi society, Saudi government has forced women to wear a veil in the public space. Women's veiling is compulsory for foreign women as well within Saudi territory and they are monitored by a religious police. This segregation policy extends to the Saudi education system and the labor market environment as well.

Education for Saudi women started in 1960 as the late king Faysal (1964-1975) allowed it in the 1960s under the name of modernization of the country. However, the government's ambitious policy was faced with strong opposition from the religious authority who viewed it as causing moral hazard and corruption. Alleging that the Quran and Hadith do not oppose women's education, the government



persuaded religious authority, saying that it is useful to educate mothers for the future generation. Since then, women's education in Saudi Arabia started in segregated area under the control of the Ministry of Religion, unlike their male counterparts who were regulated by the Ministry of Education. Even though women's education was initiated by the need for national development plan, rather than by women's need, there was a remarkable achievement in the education field over the last eight years. The recent revolutionary reforms include an increase in the number of universities in the Kingdom from eight to close to thirty, the opening of colleges, technical and health institutes and faculties of education for girls and the opening of the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) and women's university, Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University. As a result, currently 60% of Saudi women study at the university and outnumber male students.

Unfortunately, their education has not meant greater employment of women even though 65% of Saudi women are eager to work in search of economic independence from the family as well as economic contribution to their family budget (Zawya, 2 Jul 2012). According to a World Bank report, Saudi Arabia women's employment rate stands at less than 12% and which is the lowest in the Middle East and North African region. The quota further drop to 6.1% when expatriates are not included in the calculation (Arabnews 25 March 2013).

Women's absence in the work force is not only a matter of her education level and ability but it is also a matter of structural limitation within Saudi society. Even though the number of women who study at the university outnumber their male counterpart, women in Saudi Arabia are discriminated by legal, religious and cultural constraints. For example, the labor law of Saudi Arabia stipulates segregation of gender in the office in any case. The royal decree of 3 August 1985 specifically stipulates that the state "prevents the Saudi Arabian woman from





working in all spheres except teaching in female schools and nursing" and proclaims that "it is prohibited under any circumstance to integrate adolescent girls and women with men in places of work or facilities attached to them" (Altorki 2000, 230). There is also wage discrimination against women as women earn less than men in comparable jobs despite having the same level of education and qualification. On average, they earn about half the salary of men. However, the Ministry of Labour regulations has recently stipulated equal pay for equal work.

In addition to that, the Saudi government designates appropriate job for women as education and health care because they admit fundamental differences between men and women in their ability and nature. Female employment in Saudi Arabia is disproportionately high in the teaching and nursing fields which emphasize women's basic nature of caring. However, recently the Ministry of Labor has, in accordance with the Saudization policy, expanded the number of jobs that women could hold to include: receptionist, tailor, banquet-hall employee, nutritionist, governess, photographer, beautician, caterer, and hospitality or recreation industry worker (Almunajjed, 2010). Women also could manage their own business investment and enterprises under the permission of male guardian, and 97% of which are in wholesale and retail trade, finance and business services, and construction. The government policy faces strong opposition from the conservative religious authorities as well as their advocates as they consider women's work as destroying the family as well as cultural and religious value.

The Saudi government is trying to make balance and satisfy various group's need; however, the result is paradoxical. For example, in order to meet government's propel to reform in one hand and opposition of the conservative religious activists demand on the other hand, government opened women-only hotel in Riyadh in 2008, and designated women-only visiting hours at parks, museums, and shopping malls. Even more, Saudi Arabia appointed Hufuf area as



women-only industrial city in 2012 and expected to hire 5000 Saudi local women (Guardian, 12 August 2012). Overall, while Saudi is caught in the dilemma of protection of their national Islamic value on the one hand and reform on the other hand, it can be generally said that Mashall's model of citizenship is absent in Saudi Arabia.

#### IV. Current situation of Saudi Arabia and remaining issues to address

Even though there has been reform on behalf of Saudi women in various fields since 2005, women's status is still low in terms of civil, political, and social rights of citizenship and there are still some remaining issues to be resolved for genuine achievement of women's reform. For example, <Gender Gap Index> surveyed by World Economic Forum in 2012 shows the current Saudi women's situation, Saudi Arabia was ranked 131st out of 135 countries (World Economic Forum 2012).

<Global Gender Gap Index Ranking>

Country	Overall	Economic Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment	Health and Survival	Political Empowerment
Japan	101	102	81	34	110
UAE	107	122	1	111	81
Korea	108	116	99	78	86
Kuwait	109	106	60	111	130
Bahrain	111	118	47	111	112
Qatar	115	107	36	127	133
<b>Saudi</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>133</b>
Yemen	135	132	133	82	128

(Source: The Global Gender Gap Index 2012 Rankings)



The index presented here benchmarks national gender gaps in economic (based on labor force participation and wage equality), political (ratio of gender and length of policy-decision making position), educational (gender access to education and literacy rate) and health criteria (sex ratio at birth and healthy life expectancy), and provides country rankings that allow for effective comparisons across regions and income group. Saudi women are still discriminated in the field of economic participation (ranked 133) and political empowerment (133). From the table above, there seems to be little evidence that the Saudi government has the genuine intention to reform women's issues and it seems that it only wants to pretend to do it for show to the international community. There are several reasons behind Saudi women 'retarded' status compared to other counterparts.

First, one of the most fundamental elements that has caused the current unfavoured situation against women is the Saudi government's heavy reliance on conservative religious ideology of Wahabism from the time of Saudi government's establishment. For Saudi government, strong religious ideology plays a vital role to retain political power in terms of unification of inner Saudi society that has been divided based upon each tribal interest. However, unfortunately, Wahabi's interpretation of legal text, *Shariah*, mainly based on Quran and Hadith has been so strict and conservative, and has been selected and interpreted in favor of keeping a modern patriarchal order at the expense of their women. Saudi theologians are deeply opposed to women's equality, and many fear reform as a 'westernizing' influence that allegedly contaminates Islam. Wahabi's interpretation of *Shariah* has been watched under strict surveillance by its execution body, *mutawwa*. Under this circumstance, the Saudi government's ambitious reform has been attacked by opposition from the religious authority and their advocates.

Second, in addition to the political and religious reasons, the background of Saudi women's marginalized social status can be approached from its economic



structure that heavily relies on oil. In an interesting article, Michael Ross (2008) has asserted that women's lower status in the oil producing countries derived not from Islamic heritage of patriarchal culture but from rentier state economic structure. Focusing on oil producing countries' strong patriarchal cultures and rigid political institutions, he argued that petroleum perpetuates patriarchy and it leads to women's lower participation of labor market. It is mainly due to higher male wages caused by the expansion of the non-traded sector, which employs only men. In other word, government became a sole distributor of oil wealth to each household by employing men. Oil money in Saudi Arabia in the end obstructs development of democracy within Saudi society where the government is regarded as provider and protector rather than levier.

Third, patriarchal consciousness reinforced by the rentier state economic structure also plays an negative impact on women's status in terms of supporting patriarchal ideology, men as 'breadwinner' and women as 'housekeeper' (Doumato 2001). The structural change within Saudi society has been led by the oil boom which transferred men to the position of a salaried employer while women's work became unnecessary for maintaining a household. Under this circumstance, men became a sole independent provider of economic resources for the family, while women became a dependent consumer. In addition, women's staying at home symbolized not only wealth of family but also morality of herself and her family, ultimately discouraging women's participation in labour force. As a result, rentier state economic structure has nullified women's ability to work outside and reinforced patriarchal consciousness derived from inland Bedouin culture.

There are some suggestions to improve women's situation within Saudi society. The Saudi government and religious authority need to realize that it is so difficult nowadays to resist against 'change.' It is mainly because people are unprecedentedly networked and open due to technological development such various social network



services provided through the internet and smart phone. As we have seen, it was an actual and powerful mechanism during the Arab Spring incident that demonstrated 'bottom' to 'top' grassroots level democratic movement. It would be much wiser for the Saudi government to separate religious matters from the issues of women's equality.

Realizing women as reassured partner, not as dependent, for preparation of the Post-Oil era, Saudi government has poured \$54bn to education this year alone, which makes it one of the top ranking countries in the world in terms of education spending (Ameinfo, 16 May 2013). However in order for Saudi's effort to lead to a fruitful result, the Saudi government should release some of their customary restrictions such as permission for women to drive so they can commute from home to work freely without relying on foreign drivers; lifting restrictions on gender segregated working areas so women can work in the field which it fits their talent; abolishment of guardianship system so women can work, study and travel freely, and most importantly promotion of a national campaign that gives a message of women's social participation as an achievement not a shame. There is also further remaining issues to be solved at the whole societal level. The Saudi society should agonize together with women, instead of letting the issues of making a balance between the role of the employee at the work and a role of mother and wife at home women's sole private matters.

## V. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has been known as one of the most conservative countries in the world in terms of women's rights in citizenship. But it has started to implement various reform policies since King Abdullah's accession to power in 2005. The



reform was derived both for internal and external needs and includes preparation for a Post-Oil era and nationalization of its labor force, block of outflow of national wealth through remittance of foreign labor workers, pressure from international organizations, and the aftermath of Arab Spring in 2011. Since the reform, Saudi women have seen various changes. For example, Saudi has introduced various scholarship programs to encourage thousands of students of both sexes to study in Western universities; opened King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in September 2009 where male and female students can intermix on campus; allowed the registration of the first female trainee lawyer in a situation in which courts are sexually segregated; giving women the right to vote and run as candidates in municipal elections starting from 2015; given Saudi nationality to sons and husbands of Saudi women married to non-Saudis; allowed the appointment of 30 women to represent one-fifth of the Shura Council, which advises on new legislation; and increased the number of women's employment in the private sector.

However, regardless of the reform whether it was derived from inside or outside, the Saudi government has faced a number of issues to be resolved in order for the reform to produce fruitful results. They include resolution of the conflict between the advocates of conservative and pragmatic religious and political parties, diversification of the rentier state economic system and relaxation of patriarchal consciousness that considers women's social participation as a shame.

It is an epochal step for Saudi Arabia to introduce various women-favored reform policies to recognize them as a partner rather than dependent, even though the modern concept and practice of citizenship as expressed in Marshall's formation in Saudi Arabia would appear to be absent at the moment. There is also a clear sign that in the civil, political, social spheres in Saudi Arabia women are slowly being embraced, although it seems to take some time for both Saudi men and women to accept the reform.



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