

# GULF WOMEN'S LIVES

Voice, Space, Place

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## A Critical Analysis of Women's Petitions and Gender Reform in Saudi Arabia

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# 5 A Critical Analysis of Women's Petitions and Gender Reform in Saudi Arabia

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## Introduction

Women in Saudi Arabia are often the subject of reductive and homogenizing narratives. In 'Western' media and scholarship, they are regularly constructed and represented as '*objects* of passivity, silence, submission, veil and seclusion' (Abdo 1995: 141).<sup>1</sup> They are often depicted as never rising above their object status and have been subjected to a larger process of 'discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the Third World' (Mohanty 1988: 338). Reductive depictions of women in Saudi Arabia are not only produced externally but are also articulated within and as a result of the state's official historiographies and legitimacy narratives, in which the country is presented as a place without social divisions and in which the people are portrayed as 'not having political will or sensibilities' (Bsheer 2020: 222). Even in the work of scholars from and of the Arab region, the Saudi state's mythical narrative has been reflected, elevated and popularized, resulting in what Bsheer (2020: 8) calls a 'secondary Orientalism that dominates knowledge

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1. 'Western' in this context is not limited to feminist discourse and scholarship produced by those who, as Mohanty explains, identify themselves as being geographically or culturally from the West; rather it applies to anyone who uses analytic strategies, principles and methods that furthers rather than challenges the reductive objectification of Third World women (2003).

production on Saudi Arabia' and that feeds into consolidating the state narrative, rather than deconstructing it.

Simplistic depictions of Saudi women have been hugely beneficial to the state. In fact, gender constructions have always played into myths of national and collective identities, which has made capturing the authentic voices of women a challenge and a necessity. In Saudi Arabia, women have been consistently instrumentalized by the state to embody and symbolize the various images it has sought to project, ranging from that of an icon of Islamic piety, to—particularly since the announcement of Vision 2030 in 2016—a Kingdom of progressive modernity and reform within a 'moderate' Islamic framework.<sup>2</sup> As the country undergoes important changes, so too does the official gender discourse, altering the scope of women's rights in the country. Two of the most widely noted gender reforms, which encapsulate the state's recent emphasis on 'women's empowerment' as part of its self-promotion as a hub of cosmopolitan modernity, have been lifting the ban on women driving and the reduction in the scope of the male guardianship system (MGS) in 2017. Importantly, the result of the ongoing homogenization of Saudi women, at both international and local levels, is that their agency and their modes and discourses of resistance are often unaccounted for. In such accounts, it is the state that is charged with bringing about the necessary reforms, thereby establishing society as the cause of underdevelopment and the state as the primary agent for progress, where progress, as it is defined by international agencies, is increasingly linked to a neoliberal discourse of progressive secular modernity (Hasso 2009).

This chapter challenges such culturalist and uncritical accounts, which not only contribute to the reductive homogenization of Saudi society but also take part in the concealment of decades of women's advocacy demanding the recent reforms that have been portrayed as top-down (Friedman 2017). To do so, the chapter takes an innovative approach to capturing the voices of Saudi women by analysing petitions authored by them between 2011 and 2016, which challenge the (former) ban on driving and the MGS. By analysing the petitions as expressions of Saudi women's voices, the chapter offers a new and

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2. Vision 2030 is an economic diversification strategy that encapsulates a series of economic, social, legal and political reforms accompanied by discursive shifts, ultimately designed to reduce the Kingdom's dependence on oil.

critical perspective on how Saudi women construct themselves as gendered selves, how they negotiate legal rights and gender hierarchies, and how they navigate the legal and social restrictions imposed on them. The analysis also sheds light on the way in which women petitioners, whilst challenging discriminatory laws and frameworks, often end up reproducing dominant state narratives and reinscribing other hierarchies and inequalities. In this sense, the chapter complicates the binary between resistance and compliance and makes an appeal for a more transnational and inclusive feminism that empowers all women, rather than only those who fit within the new state project.

### **Petitions as voice**

Petitioning is a global practice that can be found throughout history. In the literature, different definitions of petitions have been offered, the essence of which is 'writing upwards' (Lyons 2015: 317). Petitions, as they will be analysed in this chapter, are best described as letters addressed to figures of governmental authority in which citizens express certain grievances and make appeals or demands for reform. As with any form of writing, they transcend physical and spatial boundaries; they establish the petitioner's presence even in contexts and in times in which they are physically absent. In light of this, they have been a popular mode of political expression in Saudi Arabia (Kechichian 2012). In the absence of other avenues of communicating grievances to the state, citizens resort to a medium that allows them to assert their presence in a context in which their absence has been manufactured and manipulated.

Although they remain understudied in scholarship on Saudi civil society (Al-Rasheed 2015b; Kechichian 2012; Lacroix 2011), petitions have been very important for Saudi women—who until recently were excluded not only from the political sphere but also from the public sphere, where their invisibility has been engineered by the state as a hallmark of its piety and religious legitimacy. Saudi women have, particularly since public education was made accessible to women in the 1960s, engaged in different forms of writing as a means of challenging their enforced invisibility. Al Fassi explains that 'writing has come to serve as a means for women to share their experiences and negotiate their rights, power, and space depending on where they stand ideologically, intellectually and socially' (2016: 189). Like other women who took to the pen, Saudi women

petitioners 'are seeking recognition and a voice in writing' (Al-Rasheed 2013: 176). By petitioning, they assert their presence, obtain visibility and endurance, and reach otherwise inaccessible audiences. Therefore, petitions offer a unique opportunity to hear Saudi women's voices, which are so often concealed by homogenizing narratives. They are also a significant lens through which to understand gender politics and power dynamics in the Kingdom. They tell us about the place of women within the Saudi sociopolitical context, and equally about who is excluded not just by the state but also by Saudi women's rights activists, who, in these petitions, demand rights themselves, to the exclusion of others. Hence, they are one of the few documentary sources available that offer an understanding of how Saudi women have negotiated, challenged, reinscribed and played a part in constructing the existing gender order (Alozie 2019: 354).

### **Methodology and limitations**

This chapter focuses on two petitions, one from 2011 which challenges the ban on driving, and one from 2016 that challenges the MGS. These two petitions were selected because they capture two significant historical moments in which the state's narrative visibly changed, particularly with regard to its construction of Saudi women and their place in state and society. Both petitions were authored by Saudi women activists in Arabic.<sup>3</sup> The author names will not be divulged, though the petitions were written by Saudi women who have been actively involved in mobilizing against gender-based discrimination in Saudi Arabia through other means, such as awareness-raising initiatives, online campaigns and street demonstrations. While petitions have traditionally been circulated and delivered by hand, they can now be published and shared on international petitioning platforms and via other forms of online communication (email, messaging platforms, and social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook) to gather signatures (Briassoulis 2010). Because state officials do have a heavy presence on social media platforms, Twitter in particular, a petition reaches them without the need for in-person delivery, although Saudi women's activists still do try to deliver petitions by hand.

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3. They have been translated to English by the author of this chapter and direct quotes from the author's translation will be included in the analysis below.

To analyse the text of the petitions, this chapter employs feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), which conceives of discourse as a form of social practice, implying a dialectical relationship between texts and the situations, institutions and social structures that shape and are shaped by them (Lazar 2007). FCDA allows for an examination of the role of petitions in the challenge and reproduction of dominance, intended as any exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups that results in social inequality, including political, cultural, class, ethnic, racial and gender inequality (van Dijk 1993: 250). More specifically, it allows for an examination of 'how power and dominance are discursively produced and/or [counter-]resisted in a variety of ways through textual representations of gendered social practices' (Lazar 2007: 150). FCDA exposes the ways in which Saudi women petitioners challenge, transform or reinscribe power relations and hegemonic gender norms, which are embedded in patriarchal, nationalist and religious discourses/state narratives.

While petitions are unique sources in which Saudi women's voices are heard and in which their concerns, desires and subjectivities are revealed, they have limitations that must be noted. As written texts, they only allow the researcher to work with what the text does or does not say. Petitions are also constrained by their form and by discursive boundaries. All petitions have certain elements in common: van Voss (2002: 2) explains that 'whatever form or context, petitions [are] usually written in a deferential style, showing that the petitioner did not intend to question the established power structure'. In other words, they recognize and affirm the authority of the addressee. Additionally, in Saudi Arabia, petitioners are also seeking to minimize risks to their safety, which informs the language they choose, the demands they make as well as how they are framed, and the legal and normative frameworks to which petitioners appeal. Finally, in addition to tailoring the petition to the addressee, petitions mould their content to their targeted signatories. The more signatures a petition obtains, the more attention from the authorities it commands. This can affect the types of demands and the justifications they put forward for making the stated demands. The petitions do allow the signatories to include some information about themselves, namely their name, occupation, location (city) and gender. However, the current analysis is limited to the text of the petitions themselves, as the main focus of the chapter is on the relationship between the petition text and the state narrative to which it responds.

Because FCDA requires a reading and analysis of the petition texts in light of the context(s) in which they are situated, it must be preceded with an exploration of the necessary contextual background against which petitions are produced. The following section provides an overview of the sociopolitical context within which Saudi gender hierarchies are constructed and negotiated, and emphasizes the role of the state in producing the existing gender order.

### **The construction of the Saudi gender order**

Women are consistently incorporated in national projects and visions in a manner that affects their legal rights and their lived and embodied experiences (Al-Rasheed 2013: 3). Le Renard (2014) observes that the Saudi state has gone from promoting a model of 'Islamic femininity' towards promoting a 'liberal ideal of femininity' in which women are educated and empowered by the state, within a moderate Islamic framework that does not clash with its neoliberal modernizing vision. In doing so, the government has 'formulate[d] a normative project shaping the possibilities, opportunities, and spaces accessible to Saudi women' (Le Renard 2014: 3).

#### *Women as icons of piety*

Until the early 2000s, the Saudi state promoted itself as a bastion of Islamic authenticity. It secured and maintained its own legitimacy by basing it on its role as the true protector of Islam. In forming the Saudi state and in securing the population's loyalty to the ruler, the Al-Saud dynasty has relied heavily on the support of the religious establishment to bolster its legitimacy. This resulted in a 'form of power-sharing between the princes and the clerics', with the former having full control in matters of governance and the latter 'being put in charge of defining and enforcing social norms' (Lacroix 2019: 97). The political-religious alliance between the state and the religious clerics, therefore, has been mutually beneficial and has underpinned the functioning of the Saudi Arabian political and legal system, often to the detriment of Saudi women. The state's religious legitimacy narrative was consolidated through the state fostering a sense of religious nationalism (Al-Rasheed 2013: 17), as 'a form of nationalism in which religion was the bond that was to unite people living

in Saudi Arabia', which was especially useful in the absence of a colonial history like that of its neighbours (Bsheer 2020: 11).

Because of the politico-religious alliance, which led to the prevalence of religious discourse in both official discourse and in public life in Saudi Arabia, discriminatory laws and practices in the country have often been attributed to restrictive interpretations of Islam and to the society's cultural conservatism. The reality, however, is much more complex and the state's role in determining the status of Saudi women cannot be ignored. On this note, Al-Rasheed (2015a: 293) has argued that 'the subordination and exclusion of Saudi women is a political—rather than simply a religious or social—fact', as Saudi women have been used by successive Saudi rulers as tangible markers of the state's Islamic credentials, as 'godly women', signs of the authenticity of the nation and its compliance with God's law (Al-Rasheed 2013: 17). They have also been used as symbols and transmitters—as mothers and teachers—of the state's religious nationalism project. They have been obliged to become the personification and embodiment of piety and to project it in their daily lives to promote the image of an Islamic nation. Women both became the stage on which the Islamic credentials of the state would play out, and—to borrow from Shahrokni's analogy describing the politics of gender segregation in Iran—they were 'included as unwitting protagonists in a play whose script was being written during its staging' (2020: 111). In constructing its image as a religious and masculine state, Saudi Arabia has depicted women as being in perpetual need of protection and control, resulting in an entire legal and social framework that institutionalizes and entrenches their subordination and infantilization. Saudi women's legal and social marginalization was particularly exacerbated since the late 1970s in response to the rise of political Islam across the region, as well as to internal challenges to Al-Saud's religious legitimacy by Islamist groups (Cerioli 2019: 55). Control over women's lives and bodies was conceded to religious authorities who, in turn, restricted and policed their rights and behaviour with the backing of the state.

Importantly, the state's linking of its Islamic credentials to a set of practices and tangible markers, most visibly its gender order, ultimately also 'produced a set of ideological and practical contours that shaped the state itself' (Shahrokni 2020: 115). The state was therefore not only enabled by religious nationalism but also constrained by it. This became a major issue in the early 2000s, when



the government sought to adopt a new legitimacy narrative to which religion would no longer be central.

Therefore, the government has, until recently, been cautious with the implementation of progressive gender reforms to avoid potential backlash, particularly from the religious establishment and patriarchal family units who had long been given control over women and their bodies. The official religious establishment has, at times, opposed government policy through fatwas, particularly around gender reform (Alhargan 2012: 131). The government could not introduce major reforms to women's status without reshaping its legitimacy narrative and promoting a new nationalist discourse that did not have Wahhabi doctrine at its core. This would allow it to gradually marginalize the religious establishment without losing popular support.

### *Women as symbols of progressive modernity*

In the new millennium, a series of events pushed the state to rethink its legitimacy narrative and reconfigure its internal and external political alliances. Most notable were the 11 September 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City, due to Saudi nationals participating in plotting and carrying out the attacks and their reliance on religious justifications, which echoed the religious teachings propagated by the Saudi educational system at the time (Lacroix 2011: 48). Following this, Saudi Arabia became the target of severe international criticism. The government's partnership with the religious establishment and its instrumentalization of religious nationalism to secure domestic legitimization became unsustainable, particularly once it came at the cost of its international reputation which became 'synonymous with terrorism, radical religious teachings, persistent gender inequality and stumbling economic development' (Al-Rasheed 2019). In light of this, Al-Rasheed observes that, in the state's post-9/11 narrative, Islamism was portrayed as the cause of various issues, including radicalization and gender-based discrimination and violence (Al-Rasheed 2010: 31). Islamism became akin to a foreign disease that had made its way into the country and had managed to spread and radicalize the minds of the Saudi populace. This allowed the state to conceal its own role in fostering and benefitting from the ideology underlying the attacks.

To improve its international reputation and ensure its political legitimacy and survival, the regime propagated an *islāh* or reform narrative that embraces 'moderate Islam' (Alhussein 2020: 6). This strategic shift allowed the ruling family to retain its Islamic legitimacy whilst curtailing religious influence, asserting a separation between religion and politics, and centring Al-Saud as the political authority at the heart of a new approach which would herald sociopolitical and economic liberalization. While the phrase 'moderate Islam' was initially used in the Kingdom immediately following the 11 September 2001 attacks, it became a staple of the state's narrative when the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman declared at an economic conference in Riyadh in 2017 that: 'We are returning to what we were before—a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions, traditions, and people around the globe' (BBC News 2017). In other words, this signalled a shift to an era in which the state would selectively invoke religion, but no longer rely on religious legitimacy to rule. The shift is seen in the form of nationalism propagated by the state, a renewed national narrative emphasizing secular identifications within the collective Saudi identity. In effect, it is a 'Saudi first' nationalist narrative within which Islam is retained as part of the state's identity, but only insofar as it does not clash with its political and neoliberal economic project (Alhussein 2019).

To consolidate the shift towards an era of modernization and religious moderation as means of improving its international status, the government again relied on women to portray the new image of the state: women 'became the soft face with which the state launched its charm offensive against critical international condemnation of Saudi society and religion' (Al-Rasheed 2013: 40). Therefore, since the early 2000s, the Saudi state has promoted a liberal discourse of women's empowerment, which has been accompanied by a series of legal and social reforms with the aim of elevating the status of Saudi women. This began with King Fahd's (1985–2005) decision to issue women ID cards in 2001, followed by King Abdallah's (2005–2015) appointment of women to the Shura (Consultative) Council in 2013, and then King Salman's (2015–present) decision to allow women to vote and run as candidates in municipal elections in 2015 and to drive in 2017. Crucially, the state's promotion of a neoliberal discourse of women's empowerment, particularly since the launch of Vision 2030 in 2016, has allowed the state to assert itself as the primary

agent for progress—the ultimate arbiter of rights and protections in the face of a society that is highly religious and resistant to change.

### **The petitions**

Against this background, two petitions authored by Saudi women will be analysed with a focus on how Saudi women not only negotiate and challenge discriminatory laws and frameworks, but also reproduce and legitimize state narratives in their activism.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, they advance certain rights for Saudi women whilst reinforcing other inequities based on class, race and nationality. In other words, they fall into a pattern of 'resist[ing] hegemonic power at [...] the interpersonal level, while reinscribing it at the national or international levels', which may render the effects of women's activism 'circumscribed and incremental, rather than fundamental or consistent' (Pratt 2020: 222–23). Therefore, the analysis below will not only mediate the connection between language and the social context in which it is used, but will also be highly attentive to hidden, or less obvious, hegemonic influences of power and dominance.

#### *2011 driving ban petition*

The 2011 petition was authored and circulated as part of the Women2Drive campaign, which was launched by Saudi activist Manal Al-Sharif in 2011 calling on Saudi women to drive their cars on 17 June 2011 in defiance of the driving ban. This was not the first petition in which Saudi women called on the state to end the ban. However, it was significant because it marked the reignition of Saudi women's rights activism challenging the driving ban, after a two-decade-long hiatus.<sup>5</sup> The 2011 petition mirrors the state's discourse

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4. The petitions discussed here, either the original Arabic versions or the author's English translations, can be obtained from the author upon request.

5. In November 1990, Saudi women organized a demonstration against the ban on driving, which was preceded by a petition addressed to Prince Salman, Governor of Riyadh at the time. The women were met with a harsh state response that deterred them from engaging in organized activism until the Women2Drive campaign in 2011, inspired by the wave of Arab uprisings.

of reform, women's empowerment and religious moderation in which the Saudi woman is constructed as a visible and active participant in social and economic life who is no longer limited to the private sphere of the home, but who nevertheless remains protected from society by the masculine and paternalistic state. It differs significantly from a petition authored in 1990 by a group of Saudi women, known as the 'Ladies of November', who participated in the first ever organized driving demonstration in the Kingdom on 6 November 1990.

In the 2011 petition, the authors emphasize the social and economic dimensions of the driving ban. They explain that the driving ban has effects on their domestic life and their work life, both areas of importance under the state's narrative. This is done explicitly, for example, when they write that the obstacles that arise from the lack of transportation negatively impact 'one of two things: either related to domestic issues with regards to children and parents, or going to work'.

Therefore, the first justification the petitioners put forward for demanding the right to drive is that it would allow them to handle domestic matters more easily, such as 'tak[ing] care of children, patients and elderly people'. In beginning the petition in this way, the petitioners mirror the dominant narrative that the Saudi woman belongs first and foremost in the domestic sphere. In doing so, they uphold traditional gender roles within a patriarchal family structure that are deeply entrenched in Saudi society and institutionalized through the MGS. However, in emphasizing their role as carers, the authors of the petition present the Saudi woman not as a mere dependant, but a more active player in family life. In fact, they expressly reject their role as dependants in the family and manifest discontent with the impracticality of 'women's reliance on some family members such as the brother, the father or even the husband to see to their affairs' and complain that this 'disrupts their interests and exposes them to the humiliation of asking' a male relative to drive them. However, this does not extend to explicitly challenging the MGS as a structure, which only comes later in the 2016 petition.

The authors' act of linking demands to end the driving ban with women's role in the family recalls Fernea's (1998) notion of 'family feminism', in which 'Islamic feminists strive to create equality, not for the woman as an individual but for the woman as part of the family, a social institution still seen as

central to the organization and maintenance of any society', the dominant form of feminism among Gulf women (Fernea 1998: 416).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, rather than endorse a liberal notion of individual autonomy and freedom, the petitioners' "contextual self" emerges as an identity that may be tied to family, tribe, and religion, rather than a Western notion of individual autonomy' (Strobl 2010: 63). In this, the petitioners also replicate the state's construction of Saudi women as mothers who transmit to their children the values of the nation. This makes gendered analysis even more important, considering how the petition 'appeal[s] to paternalistic codes' and upholds patriarchal values and established gender norms in Saudi Arabia (Irfan 2020: 81).

Moreover, as they emphasize their role as workers, the authors also link the driving ban to the financial disadvantages that lack of transportation presents to women and their families. In particular, they complain about the need to hire a foreign driver to whom they must pay part of their 'salary that does not even suffice to cover their own needs'. In highlighting the legitimate economic burden that ensues from hiring a driver, the authors appear dismissive of the reality that many Saudi women cannot afford to hire one, thereby ignoring and reinforcing class disparities between Saudis, as well as reinscribing the dominance and inequality produced through the *kafala* (visa sponsorship) system, an unequal and abusive legal framework based on labour exploitation and border control and violence. On this matter, the petition refers to 'the great harm that comes with drivers due to their lack of discipline and moral deviation which threatens family members, for there have been many recorded cases of abuse'. In doing so, the authors reproduce harmful and exclusionary racialized stereotypes that equate foreignness with immorality. The petition shows no regard for the manner in which restrictions on Saudi women's mobility result in their own complicity in the everyday control and exploitation of migrant workers, as well as the double burden to which migrant women are subjected, both as women whose internal mobility is restricted by the

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6. Islamic feminism is a gendered epistemology that grounds women's rights in Islamic sources rather than in other domestic or international legal sources. To do this, proponents engage in a methodology of independent reasoning to reinterpret religious texts in a more egalitarian manner. Although many Saudi women reject the term feminism, it is a useful term for understanding the methodology, strategies and discourses employed by the authors of the petitions when making rights claims.

driving ban, and as women whose bodies and lives are more largely and pervasively constrained by the *kafala* system. In addition to the relations of dominance that this reinforces, it also presents a combination of paternalism and exclusionary nationalism, as the petitioners ('daughters of the nation') are seeking this protection from the King ('our dear father'). By referring to the King as a father figure and as protector of his citizen daughters, the petitioners construct themselves within the same political and cultural narrative the state has propagated about Saudi women's need for masculine protection.

Additionally, the petition mirrors and reinforces the state's religious legitimacy narrative. The authors emphasize their Islamic identity by speaking in the name of the 'Saudi Muslim woman' and by invoking Islamic principles and frames of reference throughout the petition. The authors express that they 'want to exercise [their] legitimate right to drive a car'. The use of the term 'legitimate right', which refers to a right grounded in sharia, indicates that they are not referring to secular human rights, but rather a right grounded in Islam. Therefore, in addition to endorsing a 'family feminism', the authors also ground their rights claims in local normative frameworks and frames of reference. According to Yamani (2006: 13), women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia employ religious discourse because it is 'the legitimate language of the nation', in the sense that it is more difficult for both the state and the religious authorities to refute. The use of religious frames of reference also signals an awareness of the importance of religion to the state's legitimacy narrative and as a national value. This is clear when the authors of the petition write that if allowed to drive, in exercising their right, they would do so 'with full respect for the values of their generous nation and its Islamic roots'.

In requesting the right to drive, the petitioners reflect and reinforce the state narrative. In addition to reinforcing a paternalistic dynamic between the government and Saudi women citizens, the petitioners also invoke and reinscribe nationalist, religious and increasingly neoliberal discourses, all of which are propagated by the state. Importantly, the reproduction of hegemonic terms in the petitions should not be taken at face value, as the employment of a certain term or code does not necessarily signify acceptance. Irfan argues that it is often a 'performative tactic deliberately designed to increase the likelihood of an appeal's success' (2020: 82). The invocation of paternalistic and patriarchal discourses may also be a way of achieving 'subversiveness through

reappropriation' whereby a woman writer 'plays with her cultural subordination in the symbolic order by replicating herself in the syntax of its familiar grammar, but always as a commentary on it' (Zaeske 2002: 158).

### *2016 MGS petition*

The year 2016 marked a clear shift in the Saudi state discourse. The new regime, led by King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, accelerated the pace of gender reforms and made women's empowerment a key component of the state's new economic agenda, encapsulated in Vision 2030. The state's increasingly neoliberal narrative emphasized the role of women as citizens, active participants in the prosperity of the nation, and importantly, successful economic actors. Saudi women saw in this an opportunity to shift their efforts to target what many regarded as the core of their marginalization: the MGS.

The focus on activism challenging the MGS began in 2016 when Saudi women launched the I Am My Own Guardian campaign (Doaiji 2017). The launch was timed to coincide with the release of a report by Human Rights Watch titled 'Boxed In', which was released on 17 July 2016. The campaign largely focused on spreading local and global awareness about the daily forms of discrimination Saudi women faced, and in turn on applying pressure on the Saudi government to take action to abolish the guardianship system. The 2016 petition, authored around the same time, is the most important petition to have circulated in Saudi Arabia with a focus on the MGS.

A first draft of this petition was authored in August 2016 by a prominent women's rights activist and was edited by twenty-five fellow-women activists. In August 2016 it was published online as a Google Document and was promoted on Twitter as part of the I Am My Own Guardian campaign in order to gather signatures. When it was taken offline after a month, it had gathered 14,682 signatures, at which point the petition was delivered in person to the Royal Court by Saudi activist Aziza al-Yousef on 26 September 2016.

The most noticeable feature of the 2016 petition is that it is largely framed within a narrative that has already been adopted and heavily propagated by the government, particularly since the launch of Vision 2030. Because of this,

there is a clear difference in the references employed between the MGS petition and the driving ban petition discussed above, but not in the strategy, which once again is largely based on situating demands within and reflecting the official state narrative. So, many demands made by the petitioners have been put forward in a way that demonstrates to the government how adopting them would benefit the state itself and help achieve the goals it has set for the country, rather than asserting them as rights claims that the state is under an obligation to guarantee its citizens.

Although the petition does not mention Vision 2030 explicitly, it does refer to the government's National Transformation Plan (NTP), one of the 'Vision Realization Programmes'. The petition begins by referring to the state's announcement of the NTP and the rest of the petition follows within this established narrative, 'with its emphasis on economic participation and individual responsibility' (Doaiji 2017: 1). In fact, throughout the petition, the MGS is challenged with reference to how it 'impedes the realization of the NTP', which the state is committed to achieving.

By referring to what the state has already endorsed and even propagated, the petitioners position themselves as merely asking the state to make good on its own promises. This is exemplified when the petition refers to the government's announcement of the NTP in which it 'confirmed its commitment to continue developing the talents of [female] citizens and empowering them'. They situate their demands within the bounds of what the state has already committed to do, effectively minimizing the boldness of the petition, adopting 'a language that gave them permission to speak, drew in state intervention, and allowed them to (re)define in some measure the meaning of justice, even while ostensibly sticking to the terms of officially acceptable discourse' (Chalcraft 2005: 318).

Although the petitioners limit their challenge of the MGS to areas the state has already expressed a commitment to reforming, and continue to seek empowerment from the state, their use of the word 'citizens' (*muwatinat*), which is feminized in the Arabic text, is significant. It is an assertion that Saudi women demand to be recognized as full citizens in terms of how they are treated under the law, and not merely in official discourse. Moreover, in asserting their citizenship, the petition departs from the father–daughter dynamic prevalent in the driving ban petition. Instead, it employs a



citizen–state dynamic, which is notable because the attainment of full citizenship is the core aim of those seeking to abolish the MGS.

Again, in this petition the authors ground their demands within an Islamic normative framework. For example, they assert that ‘the existence of the [MGS] cannot be reconciled with legitimate Islamic opinions which confirm a mature woman’s guardianship over herself and her residence and her money and the management of all her affairs’. Here the petitioners point to the plurality of religious interpretations while working within the confines of state discourse as they begin the sentence with ‘Considering the position of the kingdom in the Islamic world’. This is a direct reference to Vision 2030, which according to its website ‘draws on the nation’s intrinsic strength’, the first of which is that ‘Saudi Arabia is the land of the Two Holy Mosques which positions the Kingdom at the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds’ (Vision 2030 2022). It is important to note that Islamic feminism had by then become part of the state narrative, exemplified by the announcement that women would be included in the Council of Senior Scholars, due to the efforts of Saudi women’s rights activists to use it to challenge dominant interpretations of Islam which have been used to discriminate against women.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, while in the driving ban petition the use of Islamic feminism did reflect the state’s religious legitimacy narrative, it also transformed it by creating a space for alternative interpretations that granted women more rights.

### Conclusions

This chapter has argued that the ‘Saudi woman’ has been repeatedly homogenized and constructed to support and advance shifting state narratives and political agendas. It argued that women are consistently instrumentalized to serve national projects and visions in a manner that affects their legal rights and their lived experiences. While attentive to the ways in which the state

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7. The Council of Senior Scholars is Saudi Arabia’s highest religious body. Established in 1971, it advises the King and provides religious support for royal decrees. Including women in the Council recognizes the importance of women as producers of religious knowledge and creates an opportunity for their issues to be voiced and reflected within official spaces.

consistently reshapes its gender politics to suit its legitimacy narratives, the chapter emphasized that women are not merely passive objects whose subjectivities are entirely defined by the state. One way in which they have asserted their presence and negotiated their rights is through petitioning.

By conducting a feminist critical discourse analysis of two petitions from 2011 and 2016, this chapter identified shifts in the frames of reference and discursive strategies employed by Saudi women activists when challenging the ban on driving and the MGS. The analysis of the petitions not only revealed the ways in which petitioners challenged the ban on driving and the MGS, but also other inequities reinscribed in their discourse. The analysis showed that the demands and justifications put forward by the petitioners were often framed within discursive bounds set by the official state narrative. In doing so, they reinscribed paternalistic and patriarchal relations and advanced certain rights for Saudi women whilst reinforcing other hierarchies based on class, race and nationality in particular.

Regardless of whether these discourses are truly endorsed by the authors of the petitions or whether they are strategic performative tactics employed to increase the likelihood of the petitions' success, it is necessary to recognize the legitimizing effect that the reproduction of hegemonic discourses has, as well as the possibilities for more inclusive forms of living that they preclude.

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