

# Playing Politics: How The New York Times Misrepresents Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia

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*The New York Times and other main-stream media outlets in the U.S. are cautious on how they portray one of the most important political figures in the Arab World, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Monarchy is close to Washington and Tel Aviv and has an abundant supply of oil and gas reserves, an important element to the U.S. war machine.*

The New York Times published a story on the death of King Abdullah and his policies titled 'King Abdullah, a Shrewd Force Who Reshaped Saudi Arabia, Dies at 90.' The report declares Abdullah, a moderate reformer concerning Saudi Arabia's economy and on the "War on Terror." Ironically it was the The New York Times who reported in 2012 that a majority of the weapons supplied by Saudi Arabia and Qatar were ending up in the hands of "hard-line jihadists" in Syria. Saudi Arabia has supported terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and eventually the Iranian government, an enemy state of Saudi Arabia. But one particular area the report touched upon was King Abdullah's new reforms that provided basic human rights for women:

Abdullah's Saudi Arabia had hurtled from tribal pastoralism to advanced capitalism in little more than a generation. The fundamentalist clerics who gave the family legitimacy remained a powerful force. Women who appeared in public without the required covering risked arrest or a beating from the religious police.

Abdullah did make changes that were seen as important in the Saudi context. He allowed women to work as supermarket cashiers and appointed a woman as a deputy minister. At the \$12.5 billion research university he built and named for himself, women study beside men.

The New York Times also pointed out the fact that women were still forbidden to drive and that promises made by King Abdullah were never realized, *"however, he did not fulfill a promise made to Barbara Walters of ABC News in his first televised interview as king in October 2005: that he would allow women to drive, a hugely contentious issue in Saudi Arabia."* A fact no propaganda newspaper can hide. Saudi Arabia has beheaded 10 people so far this year compared to 90 beheadings in 2014. It looks like the Saudi government is projected to surpass their 2014 total. Saudi Arabia has one of the most egregious domestic policies in the world. Besides women being jailed for driving, there are also laws that forbid any criticism of the Saudi Monarchy. Liberals or leftists are flogged and dissidents are routinely tortured. The Saudi religious police monitor women for "tempting eyes" and can forcibly cover them at will. The World Bank published a study in 2014 and confirmed that the worst country in the world for women is Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Monarchy is responsible

for placing legal restrictions on women and do not provide legal benefits such as maternity leave. Women face discrimination for certain activities that include a ban on international travel to applying for a passport or a national identity card. Adam Coogole wrote an article for Human Rights Watch (HRW) titled *'The Truth about Saudi King Abdullah's Human Rights Record'* and said the following:

Perhaps Abdullah's greatest achievement was creating momentum for women's rights reforms through promotion of higher education opportunities for women, including scholarships to study abroad, facilitating the entry of women into the workforce, and announcing that women will be able to run and participate in municipal elections later in 2015. In a symbolically important step, in 2013 he appointed 30 women to Saudi Arabia's Shura council, an advisory body that makes recommendations to the cabinet.

These reforms, however, did not address the key underlying issues entrenching discrimination against women, such as the male guardianship system, under which ministerial policies and practices forbid women from obtaining a passport, marrying, travelling, or accessing higher education without the approval of a male guardian, usually a husband, father, brother, or son. Despite Abdullah's rhetorical support in 2005 for the idea of women driving, at his death they remain forbidden from getting behind the wheel, and authorities arrested women who dared challenge the driving ban.

King Abdullah also pardoned a teenage girl who was gang-raped at knifepoint by several men after she was found in a car with a male companion who was not a member of her family which is considered illegal. She was convicted and sentenced up to 6 months in prison and was to receive 200 lashes. According to various reports, King Abdullah pardoned her *"for the Greater Good"* although he believed she was guilty under Saudi law.

Another incident that took place under King Abdullah's reign in 2002 was when 15 girls died in a dormitory fire because the religious police did not allow them to escape from the deadly fire because they were not dressed properly so *"the King dismissed the head of women's education"* according to the Times report. Saudi Arabia's first elections for municipal councils took place in 2005 and then again in 2009 that would have allowed women to vote for the first time as King Abdullah had promised but *"was postponed until September 2011. Then in March of that year, the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs announced that the question of women voting would be put off indefinitely "because of the kingdom's social customs."* Author Robert Lacey described how the elections in Saudi Arabia were a shame and considered irrelevant to the Saudi Ruling party in his book *'Inside the Kingdom : Kings, Clerics, Modernists, Terrorists, and the Struggle for Saudi Arabia'*:

Admittedly the voting, held in the spring of 2005, was only for local, virtually powerless municipal councils — and then for only half the seats on those; women were not allowed to stand for office or to vote. But the male electorate got the change to eat large quantities of mutton for three weeks, since Saudi electioneering proved to revolve around lamb and tents ... candidate held court, inviting voters inside [their tents] and plying them with mountains of rice and whole roasted sheep.

The New York Times also declared that Abdullah's legacy will be remembered for his scholarship program for Saudi Arabia's youth:

Abdullah's greatest legacy, however, may prove to be a scholarship program that sent tens of thousands of young Saudi men and women abroad to study at Western universities and colleges. It has been suggested that the changes long resisted by conservative forces — resistance that even a king could not overcome — would one day come about as those men and women rose in the government, industry and academia.

What was interesting in the New York Times report is that they did not mention any of the beheadings against women or any other civilians committed by the Saudi Monarchy, it mentioned the terrorists it arrested and executed:

Still, Abdullah became, in some ways, a force of moderation. He contested Al Qaeda's militant interpretations of the faith as justifying, even compelling, terrorist acts. He ordered that textbooks be purged of their most extreme language and sent 900 imams to re-education sessions. He had hundreds of militants arrested and some beheaded.

*"All the News That's Fit to print"* is one truth that the New York Times still does very well.

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