

Binding women to restrictions

Many in Saudi Arabia point out, quoting scholars, that it is not an Islamic issue but one of control

By Tariq Al Maeena, Special to Gulf News

Published: 00:00 April 22, 2012

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Women in Saudi Arabia continue to face restrictions. Or so that's what most of the liberal intellectuals and social activists believe. And they are quick to point out a few examples among many that substantiate their claims.

Take the case of Dr Samia Al Amoudi, an obstetrician and gynaecologist by trade who found herself diagnosed with breast cancer six years ago. The ordeal with her affliction shook her to the core, but it also strengthened her resolve to meet her illness head-on. In her own words, she describes the moment she was diagnosed as "a date that has a special place in my heart and the hearts of my children, family and my loved ones."

"Being a doctor, the moment I felt a lump, my medical instincts sharpened. I began to feel the lump and checked the tumour and the lymph nodes under my arm. The disease did not only make me a stronger

woman, it also made me more capable of dealing with life's crises. It added to my faith and made me see my life differently," she said.

But she did not choose to suffer in silence. She informed her family about her condition and then turned to the requisite chemotherapy radiation for treatment. After beating the disease, she took the path of spreading awareness and received many global awards for bringing the issue of breast cancer to the forefront among Arab women. As a single mother of two, she was the first Saudi to share her private conflict with cancer with women in the region by bringing her ordeal and its impact out on the public stage.

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In 2007, Condoleezza Rice the US secretary of state, recognised her achievements during an award — the first International Women of Courage Award — that was presented to honour her breast cancer awareness campaign across Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. In 2010, she was chosen among the top 100 in the region who had made changes in their societies. Samia also has written more than a dozen books and has received international honours from governments and international institutions.

After having successfully fought her personal battle so courageously and helped thousands of other women seek early detection and care, Samia admits that she remains defeated in one aspect of her personal life. And that is the restriction placed on her mobility by the issue of male guardianship which dictates that she, like all other Saudi women, requires the permission of a male to travel abroad.

It is not enough that driving is not permitted for women and often leaves women at the mercy of some very inexperienced hands at the wheel, but to be subjected to asking for permission to travel to attend conferences or lectures in her field is something that does not sit well with a woman who not only overcame a personal battle with a deadly disease, but along the way helped over 50,000 other women deal with it.

Narrow mentality

As she tweeted, "I have passed 50 years [age] and am a physician, and have received at my hands thousands of patients, and yet I am required to get permission from a male guardian to travel to a medical convention. In my case [as a single mother] it is my son who I will have to turn to, the baby I had given birth to."

Why then, many wonder, is this restriction on women's mobility still allowed to continue, especially in view of the kingdom's publicly announced intentions of ensuring that women's rights would be promoted and respected?

Perhaps it has something to do with the mentality of some of our clerics who arouse enough vocal complaints when it comes to women's issues. Perhaps none can be highlighted better than a point of view raised by a Saudi cleric at a recent conference in Qaseem, a city outside Riyadh. During the 'Women in the Prophet's tradition and the modern woman: Saudi Arabia a model' conference, Shaikh Al Fowzan, who is also a member of the Saudi Human Rights Commission, shared his apprehensions that CEDAW

(Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) could be implemented and that it sent shivers through him.

Since Saudi Arabia had formally signed the agreement in 2000, the conclusions of this conference were that the Saudis should withdraw from the CEDAW agreement, as its implementation may give women more freedom than they should be allowed. It is precisely this narrow framework of thinking that has left many, intellectuals or otherwise, perplexed at the continuing restrictions on women at a time when they feel the kingdom is coming of age. It is not an Islamic issue, they point out, quoting many scholars, but one of control. And that control is precisely what those who vigorously oppose women's rights are afraid of losing.

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