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Through the eyes of a woman: Using oral history to explore the enigmatic world of Saudi Arabia's female population

By Carmen Winkel¹ and Laura Strachan²

Abstract

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) remains cloaked in mystery and stereotypes especially when it pertains to its female population. Oppression? Subjugation? Discontent? These typecasts reverberate around the world, but interestingly when one speaks to a Saudi woman her story offers diverging representations of Saudi life that often debunk those expressed elsewhere. But without scholars asking “real” people about their lives and analyzing their lived responses, these dominant narratives are reaffirmed over and over again. To move beyond these stereotypes, this paper attempts to address the lives of Saudi Arabian females by using firsthand accounts obtained for an undergraduate student project. “The Oral History Project”, initiated by the two authors using traditional oral history methods to teach history, geography and leadership at a private university in the kingdom, has female students interviewing family members about their past focusing on topics such as their life, family, tribe, and transformations due to modernity. The goal is to focus on the female perspective. Students asked common questions such as: What is life-like for a Saudi woman? How does it differ from when you were a child? How have women navigated the constraints of a traditional society and how do they perceive themselves in it? Familial responses were recorded, translated, and transcribed to create an overview of each family's history.

Keywords: Oral History, Saudi Women, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Folklore

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains cloaked in mystery and stereotypes especially when it pertains to its female population. Oppression? Subjugation? Discontent? These typecasts reverberate around the world, but interestingly when one speaks to a Saudi woman her story offers diverging representations of Saudi life often debunking those expressed elsewhere.

There is no shortage of studies and published material from around the world about Muslim women and their lived experiences, struggles and perceptions. Many anthologies have explored

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Muslim women's lives, mostly within the context of western countries like the United States and the United Kingdom (Abdul-Ghafur, 2005; Afzal-Khan, 2005; Husain, 2006; Shaffi, 2009). The topics for these compilations include religion and political participation to personal struggles attributed to sexual abuse, domestic violence and racism. Many of the accounts have come from oral history projects using in-depth interviews that were conducted primarily by female academics. But there are few anthologies from Saudi Arabia, and even less that focus exclusively on the Saudi female perspective.

When historical research is conducted in western nations there are implied freedoms for researchers regarding their choice of topics, especially with regards to historical, cultural, and societal investigations. Governments and institutions are known to fund these types of initiatives to advance a stronger national identity. In Saudi Arabia, the situation differs in various ways. Firstly, it does not have a tradition of conducting uninhibited historical and anthropological research. Rather it is very measured with Islam, Islamic civilizations, and the royal family as preferred investigative topics. It has only been within the past four decades that there has been action towards the conservation and protection of their rich historical and cultural heritage (Masry, 1981). Prior to this, schools followed a very strict Islamic and Arabic language curriculum. For academics conducting research outside of these designated topics, it remains an extremely daunting endeavour.

Research on Saudi Arabian women is even scarcer than that on Muslim women and has been achieved by only a few female, Saudi scholars (Al-Rasheed, 2013; AlMunajjed, 1997). Their number is infinitesimal when compared to research conducted on women in other nations such as the United States, Canada or Germany. For foreigners, it is extremely rare and those who had access only spent a short time in the country to conduct interviews (Le Renard, 2014; House, 2013). Few scholars have had the unique opportunity to conduct firsthand research in the kingdom. It is for these reasons that secondary and printed sources, such as newspapers, reports, letters or statistical yearbooks (Vassiliev, 2013) have become default sources. In addition, none of the analyses, whether local or foreign, implemented an oral history methodology or asked women about their past, their experiences, or their way of life explicitly. Therefore, any research that provides a glimmer of Saudi society from a local perspective offers a rare lens for analyzing this intriguing yet complex nation and its people.

Feminist scholars have argued for decades that women's stories and perspectives, the way they perceive themselves, and how they interpret their lives and experiences are necessary for understanding societies and cultural backgrounds (Sangster, 1994). This paper attempts to do this by using oral history as a mechanism for gaining insight into the lives of Saudi Arabian females. The authors attempt to move beyond the antiquated methods of secondary and tertiary sources to better understand women from women. What was/is life-like for a Saudi woman? How is life different from previous generations? How have women navigated the constraints of a traditional society? Without asking "real" people and analyzing their actual lives, academic scholars reaffirm the same dominant narratives about women and their role over and over again (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, p. 107).

This case study is based on data compiled by Saudi Arabian female university students for an oral history project initiated by the two authors. The data compilation was part of an assignment that focused on female students interviewing family members about their past focusing on topics such as their lives, family, tribe, and transformations due to modernity. Pedagogically, the instructors chose to move beyond traditional teacher-centered instruction where textbooks have been the traditional source of information in the kingdom to emphasize memorization-assessed

retention. Their project, *The Oral History Project*, facilitated critical thinking by reconnecting students to their past to increase their knowledge of local history and culture (Busby, 2011). By emphasizing a student-centered approach, the students engaged in experiential learning and firsthand, qualitative research to recount their family's journey.

Women in Saudi Arabia

It is a well-known fact that women in Saudi Arabia do not share similar entitlements as women elsewhere in the world including other Islamic countries. Saudi females have faced many restrictions and must adhere to very strict laws and customs (Al-Rasheed, 2013). A major constraint for Saudi women has been the so-called guardianship system (Alhussein, 2014, p. 2), a one-sided system deeply rooted in customs that restrict a female's mobility and freedom. Male guardians, regardless of the women's age or social status, have authority and responsibility over most legal, administrative, and personal matters. All Saudi females require a male guardian, whether it is her father, husband or a male relative, to travel abroad. This includes elderly women who have raised families. Until recently, women were not allowed to drive a car, ride a bicycle, travel abroad or even play sports without the permission of their male guardian.

Saudi Arabia's legal system does not always support gender balance. A prime example pertains to divorce. When a woman decides to divorce her husband, she must provide specific, legal grounds to validate her request. Contrary, if a man wishes to divorce his wife he can do so at any time and without any legal grounds. A divorce can even occur without the woman's knowledge, a situation that just recently changed with a new rule that obliges the court system to notify women by text messaging about any rulings regarding a divorce (BBC, 2019). This imbalance also applied to female drivers. One of the most recent and undoubtedly far reaching transformations was the 2017 decision to lift the ban on women driving. Until this time, Saudi Arabia was the only country in the world that did not allow women to obtain driving licenses (Alamri, 2017).

Employment is another area of Saudi society that women face restrictions unlike their male relatives. Women rarely worked outside of the home in the past because the workforce was restricted almost exclusively to men with women limited to the fields of nursing and education. It has only been within the last few decades that this situation has changed. Many changes have focused on women's rights in response to the high cost of living and the country's finite oil and gas resources. Another explanation is Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia's vision for its social, economic and cultural future. This ambitious plan is meant to reduce the country's economic dependence on oil and to strengthen the private sector. An integral part of Saudi Vision 2030 is the modernization of society and the empowerment of women. The proportion of working women is projected to increase from 22 percent today to 30 percent (Vision 2030, p. 39). New sources of income are needed and Saudi families, like those elsewhere in the world, require more than one income to survive in today's developed world.

Even though women's rights have improved in a variety of ways, the situation remains complex. This is especially evident when analyzing the number of females graduating from colleges and universities. Approximately fifty percent of today's graduates are female, a number unheard of twenty years ago. The young generation of Saudi women is better educated than any other generation in the country before them (Gelb & Palley, p. 447). The problem now is finding employment for all of the graduates. A primary reason for this difficulty stems from the strict gender segregation that still exists in public life. Despite a 2011 royal decree that allowed women

to work in the retail sector and in other jobs where men are present (Alhussein, 2017, p. 3), many women are still bound by tradition. In theory they can, and some do, work in the public alongside their male counterparts, but many still find it difficult due to their family's strong belief in segregation and veiling.

An Arabian Tradition

Arabian history is unambiguously diverse and complex. For millennia, the people who called the Arabian Peninsula home, shared many traditions and customs, but differed from region to region, tribe to tribe, and family to family. Historically the vast majority lived a sedentary or nomadic existence and at times a combination of both. Sedentary dwellers resided primarily in villages and towns, often associated with oases, wells or other permanent sources of water, and made their living in agriculture, craftwork and trade (Wynbrandt 2010, p. 15). Nomadic populations were primarily livestock breeders raising sheep, goats and camels. They conducted annual migrations in search of natural browse and water to sustain their large herds. Some groups practiced a combination of both sedentary living and pastoral nomadism as their chosen livelihood strategy.

The historical method of communicating important information in the Arab world was by *oral history*. In lieu of a written history, oral histories were used by complex societies and smaller social units to pass on significant knowledge from one generation to the next to safeguard traditions, customs, and knowledge deemed worthy of protecting. It was a tried and true practice. Groups, families and individuals focused on the preservation of dates and historical events in their telling and retelling of stories, songs, and poetry. The transference of cultural nuances was the glue that bonded families and tribes through shared knowledge and experiences. It remains an important Arabian tradition to this day, but on a much smaller scale. Some families still share important information in this way, while others have distanced themselves from it as a response to modernization.

Today oral histories are not only for tribesmen and women, the illiterate and the historical. Although they are diminishing in their local usage, they have come to serve as an important tool in academia for gaining firsthand knowledge while conducting research. Oral life histories and interviews, according to Maynes, Pierce & Laslett (2008), "are the predominant forms of personal narrative evidence employed in social science research and among historians who use personal narrative as evidence" (p. 72). As they noted, "For some researchers, the goal of personal narrative analysis has simply been to work from an empirical base that is more inclusive" (p. 1). Anthropologists and historians, in particular, have used oral histories for decades as a tool for investigation and data collection whereby first-person accounts broaden the scope of an inquiry as they cast a spotlight on a personal or lived experience providing nuanced understandings of lifeways and events both past and present. The virtues of a more inclusive approach reach beyond the expediency of surveys and questionnaires to achieve a more intimate analysis of the research participant and their contributions to the investigation. Maynes, Pierce & Laslett (2008) suggest that when "eliciting facts about people's lives they get answers that are shaped in terms of the cultural conventions of storytelling, often reflecting the sharing, telling, and retelling of self-narratives in many settings and over a lifetime" (p. 72).

Many scholars view oral history and folklore as one and the same³. Reynolds (2007) suggests that folklore mirrors oral history in many ways, "It is usually oral, and often a local,

³ Oral history and folklore are used interchangeably in this document.

phenomenon, and it is nearly always created and performed in one of the colloquial dialects” (p. 18). In this sense, as also noted by Reynolds (2007), folklore also provides a personalized accounting of lived experiences:

Folklore is the songs we sing without reference to printed music, the bedtime stories we tell our children without reading from a book, the family histories or experiences we recount at the dinner table over and over through the years, the jokes we hear and passion at work... (p. 25-26).

The Arab culture is permeated and held together in many different ways by its folklore (Reynolds, 2007 p. 26).

Oral history and folklore projects have a long and very productive history in Feminist Studies. Assembling women's perspectives seemed necessary to feminist scholars because women's experiences and realities have been systematically different from men's in crucial ways and therefore needed to be studied to fill large gaps of knowledge. This reconstitution of knowledge was essential because of a basic discontinuity:

women's perspectives were not absent simply as a result of oversight but had been suppressed, trivialized, ignored, or reduced to the status of gossip and folk wisdom by dominant research traditions institutionalized in academic settings and in scientific disciplines (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1987, 106).

Conducting oral history from a feminist perspective has provided insight into the lives and experiences of women who were oppressed, marginalized or seen as social outcasts (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1987). For over thirty years, they have been used around the world to study women's lives, both past and present, by interviewing females of all colours and social backgrounds (Gluck & Patai, 2013). Oral history studies have also pointed out that there are significant differences in how females and males remember and communicate their past (Hickey, 2012, p. 88). They suggest that there are differences in style and content of their stories; they want to talk about different topics. Females talk mostly within the context of their own family and placing themselves and their issues and struggles in this context, whereby male interviewees situate themselves in a more autonomous way (Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner, 1987, p. 114).

It is pertinent to point out that ever since academics started using oral history as a research tool, there has been scepticism about the reliability of eyewitness accounts. They have criticized the sources as unreliable, distorted, and biased arguing that interviewer and interviewee can influence the source they create together and therefore render useless, distorted sources:

If one takes into consideration the idea that eyewitnesses' accounts switch between individual, social, and cultural memory, then oral history interviews are an important source for getting to know how historical events and periods are remembered in a specific social group (Bertram, Wagner, & Trautwein, 2017, p. 449).

The authors argue that these nuances are what researchers look for. They exemplify the diversity in life and the breadth and depth of the human experience. Oral history allows us to

explore ignored topics such as the lives of Saudi Arabian females and diversify the narratives, beyond the compelling strictly academic point of view in which researchers (Saudis and non-Saudis) present their analysis of Saudi History (Sangster, 1994, p. 5).

As an investigative tool, the collection of folklores or oral histories adds the breadth and depth that is required for a comprehensive analysis. They reach beyond the conventions of quantitative methodologies, but cannot, as highlighted by Alessandro Portelli (2013), "...be reduced to any single meaning..." (p. 284). They solidify familial connections and identity over time.

Background and Methodology

In the fall of 2014, the authors embarked on a joint initiative. Drawing from their respective areas of expertise, they blended anthropological theory and methods with those of history in the development of a new assignment, *The Oral History Project*. The goal was to foster enhanced learning using Arabian ideologies and methodologies to facilitate a less stressful and intimidating environment for their students.

The university where the project was developed and conducted is located in the Eastern Province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The students are of various ages and, in general, come from families that are financially well off as is evident by their ability to pay the tuition fees. It is a respected, private institution of higher learning that offers both bachelor and master's degree programs taught primarily in English. As is the case in most Saudi Arabian private and public universities, it is segregated having both male and female campuses (Jamjoun & Kelly, 2013). The curriculums are virtually identical for both genders with some differences based on Saudi Arabian rules and regulations. Male instructors teach male students, while the female student body may have either a male or a female teacher. Due to gender segregation at universities in Saudi Arabia, only female students participated in this project because both instructors teach female students.

The Oral History Project was developed in 2017 for three different courses and has been repeated every semester since. To date, approximately 250 students have participated in the project. Of these 250 transcribed and recorded interviews, fifteen were selected for this paper. Not all of the project interviews focused exclusively on women in Saudi Arabia, although female issues were emphasized in all courses. Roughly sixty of these interviews dealt with the topic Women & Society. This corpus of interviews has not yet been evaluated according to demographic, social or geographical aspects. However, it can be said that the majority of the interviewees are located in the eastern region of this oil rich region part of the country where the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Saudi Aramco) is a principal employer. It successfully brought wealth, new job opportunities, and far reaching social changes to this part of the country as well as to the kingdom in general. Many of the students come from families who are working for Saudi Aramco providing them with the opportunity to attend international schools.

The assignment was a comfortable fit for the objectives of the three undergraduate courses -World Regional Geography, World Civilization and Leadership & Teamwork. It was designed to achieve several outcomes. Firstly, the authors wanted to increase the students' understanding of the Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) more specifically while preparing students for the global marketplace. Secondly, the project aimed for each student to focus less on memorization and non-critical thinking to one that promoted self-discovery, personal awareness and local, regional and national cultural/historical exploration. Lastly, the project was intended to empower students to discover their own past, including their

family's stories, culture and traditions. This was achieved through the collection of "local knowledge" past and present as conveyed by family members. For the students who were from other countries, the exercise focused on their family's experiences within their country of origin in addition to their journey to Saudi Arabia, and their experiences as expatriates in the kingdom.

The assignment consisted of five sequential steps – acquisition, transcription, translation, reflection, and presentation. Each stage was designed to foster the growth and development of the humanities and social science perspectives through key-informant interviews or firsthand accounts. Respectable approaches were prioritized during all phases of the investigation. The students adhered to established ethical protocols and accepted standards set in the syllabi, by the instructors, and the university's code of conduct. "Oral history is not just about studying people; it is also about valuing them, according to Sheftel & Zembryzycki (2013), this makes our work difficult and emotionally demanding, but it is the only way that we can try to truly understand people's lives" (p. 16). Each one had to navigate cultural norms and established restrictions especially when discussing cultural constraints and women.

The first stage or acquisition phase focused on the selection and coordination of qualified participants for scheduled interviews to collect stories and memories. Each student was responsible for conducting two to five separate interviews. In this way, there would be multiple perspectives to draw from when creating an overview of the past. According to Sheftel & Zembryzycki (2013), "Oral history is grounded in the relationship between the interviewee and interviewer—without both, there is no oral history. Furthermore, the quality of this relationship, the nature of the interviewee-interviewer interaction, has a determinative effect on the interview itself" (p. xxi). This perspective supported familial narratives not because they would offer superior results for the students, but because they would provide a more comfortable first-time experience for the novice interviewers. It was imperative that the selected participants were family members, were older than the students, and were willing to share their stories. This meant that mothers and relatives such as aunts were primary candidates. Grandmothers were viewed as key informants because they could provide reflections on ancestral generations and insight into historical perspectives. They could also provide firsthand experiences on the Saudi Arabia before the social and economic transformations that resulted from the development of the country's gas and oil industry. Combined, all would provide a broader range for the investigation.

The students were required to compile a list of interview questions that could be divided into two subcategories. The first category focused on general information questions that were to be asked of all interviewees. They were designed to elicit background information such as the participant's name, tribe, age, marital status, children, gender, and other case specific questions. The second category allowed for greater freedom whereby the interviewer was not chained to prescribed questions that limited the scope of the interview. Students could formulate their questions based on context specific queries using the interviewer's knowledge of the situation and the discussion at hand, course topics and subtopics, and textbook themes such as life in Saudi Arabia, before and after Aramco, the Gulf War, family and traditions, education and mobility, women & society, people and their landscapes, family leadership styles, and work & business. The goal was to allow for flexibility while maintaining basic topics for inquiry (Dougherty, 1999).

It was mandatory for the students to record all of their interviews. This served three purposes: 1) to provide evidence that they had completed original work, 2) they had received approval from their informant to record the conversation, and 3) they had verbatim responses that could be transcribed, translated and analyzed at a later date. Students were also instructed to take notes during their sessions to capture the nuances of the interview process.

After the interview phase, the recordings were transcribed either in totality or partially, as per their instructor's directions. The university demographic is primarily Saudi Arabian, but there were many expatriate students whose parents worked in the kingdom. During the interviews, some relatives communicated in their native tongue – Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi. The students had to transcribe these interviews from non-English recordings into English written text. English responses made the transcription task less daunting. As first-time oral history-folklore researchers, the transcription of a two to five-page document in multiple languages was beyond the scope of the assignment and the students' abilities.

Once all of the interviews had been transcribed and translated, the next phase was for the student to reflect and analyze their findings and present them in an abbreviated written report. The students were asked to consider how their family members and their familial ideologies have influenced how they are navigating their world, how they lead, how they interact with the environment, and how they use past events to inform their worldviews. The final analysis was presented as a PowerPoint presentation or a video with an English voice over.

The assignment was meant to accomplish yet another goal. The intention was to introduce the students to qualitative research methodologies and to show how they work in situ. Reynolds (2007) suggests:

Folklore is one of the richest and yet least-studied aspects of human culture, for although it is constantly present in the lived experience of everyday life, it is not usually written down or recorded but is more typically passed from one person to the next through direct communication. (p. 25).

In a country where the hard sciences are preferred, one-on-one interviews based on open-ended questions offered an alternative approach to scientific research.

Collecting Women's Voices

Collecting oral histories is an interesting, enlightening, and delicate academic line of inquiry. The benefits of oral history move beyond the constraints of generalized history books, databases, and contemporary interpretations. By conducting interviews with people who have firsthand experience and knowledge, access to lesser-known, personal and family-oriented information is exposed while providing a broader understanding of culture, history and historical discourses (Perks & Thomson 2003; Clary-Lemon & Williams 2012).

Most importantly, the exercise exposed nuanced narratives about childhood, marriage, family development, employment, and traditions. Students explored these topics from various perspectives such as the following excerpt that highlights one student's interview with her mother:

Student: Did you live in a harsh or pampered life?⁴

Mother: I live in a harsh life because my father was very strict, and he had a stable system. Such as time of sleep, time of wake up, time of meals and should everyone be in the table.

Student: How that way of life affects to you?

Mother: Off course its affect to me in a good way because he teaches me the discipline of

⁴ Excerpts from student assignments have not been edited, modified or embellished; they are in their original format and represent the diversity in student approaches.

time, patience when troubles and take a lot of care in everything.

Student: Did you made your decisions fateful on your own or your parent made it instead of you?

Mother: My parent was made the decisions because I was young, and I didn't have an experience and education enough because I was live in a small village.

Student: What about after marriage? Did you make your decisions on your own?

Mother: Off course yes because I became an old strong independent women "she laughs" but for sure I made my decisions with a little help and advices from my husband and family.

Student: If times go back, would you change some of your decisions?

Mother: Yes, I would like to study and get a bachelor's degree before I became a mother because when I was pregnant, I got some diseases then I stopped my education.

Another student recounted the experiences of her retired OBGYN mother and grandmother who lived a very traditional life. She reflected on their familial relations with Prophet Mohammed, Persian travels, pearl diving, and significant changes observed between the generations:

My second interviewee was my mother. She was an OB/GYN Doctor before retiring and she is 64 years old, married, and had 4 children. The interview was on December 12, 2018, at our house. I asked her to talk about our ancestors and she said that we are related to Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, specifically we are descendants of prophet Muhammad's uncle Al-Abbas ibn Abd Al-Muttalib. I asked her if this relation impacted their life and them being leaders and she answered that they always took prophet Muhammad as a role model in every aspect of their life and tried to follow his character and method and she thinks they inherited some of his valuable characteristics. She also mentioned that our ancestors migrate from Al-Medina to Fars Province or the Parthian Empire. Then, after several years, they went to Dammam and some of them went to Bahrain. In Dammam, my grandfather and his brothers started diving for pearl hunting in the old Dammam beach, as mentioned before, and my mother's uncle was the leader of the ship and he was directing his fellow pearl hunters.

I asked her about her childhood, and she talked about my grandmother. My mother said that my grandmother got divorced before turning thirty and with seven children. My grandmother liked sewing so she started making dresses for people in exchange for a small amount of money. However, it was enough to get her and her children's essential needs. She was a good influence of a leader on my mother and her siblings. She was kind and generous but strict sometimes when needed. My grandmother was eager to push my mother and her siblings to accomplish their studies. Thus, two of them are doctors, a nurse, an engineer, and a teacher and they are successful in their fields. Although my grandmother Fatimah was illiterate, she was concerned with her children's education and she also joined a literacy program to know the basics.

In several interviews the women talked about marriage. Some of the interviewees discussed how marriages were arranged, revealing in some cases that this was done without the girl's consent

or knowledge. Others highlighted that they were married to older men at a very young age. Currently, the minimum age for marriage in the kingdom is fifteen years, however in the past many parents married their daughters at a much younger age as highlighted by this grandmother:

When I was 10 years old the married me to a man, I was child I didn't even had my period. After couple of months, I had my period and I got pregnant very short after. I didn't know how to take care of my baby, but my mother was always in my side. When my son become 4 months, I became 11 years old and I got divorced. It was a relief actually...When I become 19, I married your grandfather, it was nothing like my first marriage, I was asked before marrying him and I saw him suitable, so I agreed. And I lived a beautiful life with him next to me...

The same women stated how these laws have changed, and that society no longer expects women to get married at such a young age. Nowadays, women must be consulted and agree to the union:

The girl is suitable for marriage when she become 10 years old. Even if she didn't know anything about the marriage, the family of her husband teaches her every detail, from how to please her husband to how to cook and take care of the house. When marring they don't consult the girl our take her opinion, in fact she has no idea until her wedding day. But now, things changed thank god. The girl is suitable for marriage when she become 20 or 25 even 40. And now she must agree or there is no marriage.

It is interesting to note that the grandmother expressed few emotions when talking about her own experience especially when discussing her age and the fact that she was eleven years old when she gave birth to her first child. This is not unusual, according to Anderson, Armitage, Jack, & Wittner (1987), for women to hide their emotions in the interview and refrain from revealing deeper feelings (p. 111). This is one of the main methodological problems oral history studies face; questions about emotions and subjective experiences are not easy to ask. But it is imperative that researchers who practice oral history ask not only about facts and activities. The primary objective is to tease out the "lived experience," which intuitively exposes emotions. It is "about feelings and women's perception of their choices and about their values" (ibid, p. 112).

Other students commented that they were surprised by their older relative's experiences, not knowing the original circumstances behind familial decisions to marry prepubescent daughters, for example. Other students indicated their grandmothers' suffering and that it was these experiences that made them the strong women that they are today. One student focused on the "secret life" of her grandmother. She learned from the assignment that her grandmother was fourteen years old when she was married to a man who was 55 years of age. Her reflections highlighted her revelations:

Knowledgeable: I knew a lot of information and secrets about the life of my grandmother, how she suffered at that time from the severity of poverty and from the difficult time she experienced without serious help because of his husband death, and also learned the nature of her personal qualities and some of her leadership style.

Explanations (Details): In these recordings, the knowledge in this story was about my grandmother's former life when her parents married her at the age of 14 and my grandfather was 55 years old, how she lived with him and how she lived for her, how she suffered after my grandfather's death and absence, how she take responsibility after him and what methods Which she did to live a happy and integrated life with her children without the need for anyone, and finally I recognized her personality and principles, her personal treaties and her leadership style.

Anecdote: My grandmother was very young when she got married, and the reason was that her family was very poor and my grandfather was a person known for good judgment and generosity. These are some of the traits of the Bedouins. My grandfather married them and after 15 years died; the pressure was on her to raise the children. Top patient, responsible and judicious as well.

Asking Questions Answering Questions: One of the most important questions was, how old was she and how many children did she have? The answer was 15 years old and gave birth to 11 children. Were her family suffering from poverty before marriage? Yes, Did she have brothers and sisters? No. Was his father alive when she married? No. Was she beautiful? Yes and a lot. Did she have a difficult time after her husband died? Yes, a lot. The other question is how did she take responsibility and get money in the absence of her husband? The answer was that she sewing clothes and selling them to the neighbors. Was she sad when she gets married? Yes What is important about how she became after her husband died? The answer was that she takes responsibility and became an independent and wise human being and was a leading woman.

Connections/Relationships: My mother told me that she was a woman known to the Bedouins for her courage in bearing responsibility in the difficult times, the woman consulted by everyone for her wisdom and intelligence, was the ideal of patience, the ideal of leadership.

Numerous women compared their current situation with their youth highlighting several of the societal changes that have occurred over the past decades. Education was a common topic to underscore recent transformations:

As far as education, culture now is more open. Females now are more heard than before.

Also, they are leaders. They are not only housewives, although I appreciate housewives and mothers very much. But now the opportunities are much, much greater. For example, in Al Madinah, it wasn't allowed for ladies to go downtown to shop for themselves or for their children, so my grandfather would bring samples home to show my grandmother to choose what she wanted or what she liked, then he would return the samples back to the store.

Older women remembered limited job opportunities for both males and females long before companies associated with the international gas and oil industry such as Saudi Aramco offered higher paying jobs to males. Women practiced traditional livelihood strategies:

It was very simple back then, so men used to work in small stores or a taxi driver or as farmers, all these jobs didn't require much education, it was more of a practice and each father passes his craft to his children. Women mostly used to stay at homes taking care of the children. But after time women started to work as teachers for almost 30 years then society started accepting the fact that women could work any job.

Another interviewee mentioned how there were few job opportunities for women, especially from lower social classes, and for those without an education. Before the discovery of oil in the 1930s and the exploration of Saudi oil fields after the Second World War, the kingdom was an impoverished desert, where most people lived under very harsh climatic conditions. There were only a few cities and the livelihood strategies were based on fishing, trading, and farming (House, 2013, p. 23). Most Saudis lived as pastoral Bedouin in small villages or in the smaller settlements along the coast. Life was simple and hard, as described in this interview:

Bring wood and sell it. Or if a woman is poor she can work in other houses, help with cleaning and cooking, take care of children and baby-sitting if the parents were traveling. Also she can work as a beaker from her house or tailor for other women. Sometimes women can open a small shop in her house where she sells utensils or fabrics. Also, they can work like doctors and make medicines.

With increasing oil revenues came dramatic economic and social changes. After the end of the Second World War, the once poor, desert state turned into a 'rentier state', providing its inhabitants with a wide range of social benefits, secure government jobs and gradually improving the country's infrastructure and educational system (Vassiliev, 2013). The rentier economic system relies heavily on oil revenues and is characterized by an underdeveloped private sector, a system that worked well as long as the oil revenues were high. With the dropping oil prices of recent years and a fast growing, young population, economic reforms are necessary and have already been implied under the Saudi Vision 2030. However, the rentier system that provided job security for many Saudis from the 1960 onwards, allowed the monarchy to implement far reaching social reforms, without the fear of a backlash from religious- conservative groups of the society. Part of these reforms allowed girls a formal school education. The first primary schools for female students opened in 1960 in the capital city of Riyadh (Hamdan, 2005, p. 47). Prior to this, girls were not taught in formal schools, only private, informal schooling was possible, which was mostly religious in nature.

Many women commented on how education has changed the lives of Saudi females. The first female schools remained limited in their capacity and were only to be found in the capital city or the larger communities on the coast. Today the number of female college students outnumbers the number of male students (Alsuweida, 2016). One mother, whose father appeared to be more open-minded than other men of his generation, reflected on the limited choices for females in the past. She highlighted that finding employment was not expected of women. At a time when women began to break away from traditional roles, her father did not push his daughter into education or

employment:

My dad didn't mind us not getting jobs later, but we had to have a college degree for security. I went to King Abdul-Aziz College in Jeddah, where I studied accounting. After college, you were expected to get married, have kids, and take care of them. There wasn't that much pressure to getting a job. It was the man's job to provide, and the woman's job to have the house and kids in order.

Female employment in Saudi Arabia remains relatively low to this day. World Bank statistics indicate that only 22% are employed, which is very low in comparison to other Gulf-countries (World Bank, 2018). Many families still believe that a woman's place is in the home with her children. This point of view is slowly changing mostly because families need to have an additional source of income to support the lifestyle associated with a modern society.

Many interviewees, especially the mothers who were in their 40s and early 50s, shared their views about the future for Saudi women and expressed a very positive outlook about the country's transformations including Saudi Vision 2030:

Where do you see Saudi women in the future? Well of course with vision 2030 a lot of things are going to change especially with women. Driving the car is one of the biggest events that happened so far and I'm pretty sure that we are going to see more events as big as this one. And I hope to see them reach their goals and don't stop no matter what.

As noted, most of the student interviewees were Saudi nationals, while others were either born elsewhere or were born in Saudi Arabia to non-Saudi parents due to their employment in the kingdom. These individuals hold the same passports as their parents. All are considered expatriates despite living most of their lives in Saudi Arabia. Their interviews expressed diverging narratives such as the one from a Palestinian grandmother as highlighted in her granddaughter's reflection:

In the PowerPoint presentation, I mentioned that my grandmother had an autocratic leadership style however, during the interview and her recalling memories of the past, I discovered a different and new side of her that was very gentle and not angry or strict, and I am elated to have seen it! Focusing on the personalities and discovering the leadership styles of my family was a very interesting part too. What was more interesting is the realization that women in the family, mostly in the past, had a very strong leadership style in the house. Looking at the younger side of women in the family, anyone could tell that men were more dominant in the house and therefore, knowing that my grandmother, her mother, and grandmother had strong personalities that did not reflect on the girls, shows that the environment and culture you live in can affect your personality. After they moved to Saudi Arabia and faced the complete change of culture, women of the younger generation in the family started developing weaker leadership styles within the household than in the past. Because of the fact that in Saudi Arabia women's ability to depend themselves have been suppressed from different things therefore, they got used to having a "lower voice" within. Unlike living in Palestine with a different culture where women had to be strong and hold on the house, sometimes by themselves. This also

shows why most of the grandchildren have other leadership styles that are similar to the male side of the family, including myself. My leadership style, transformational, has descended from both of my grandfathers and my father mostly.

Another student interviewed her Indian mother about her life in Saudi Arabia. The woman described how she followed her husband to the kingdom after he was hired to work for a large international company. She described how difficult it was for her to adapt to the very strict and limited Saudi environment:

But the environment here is very different and conservative as compared to back home. Wanting to do anything became a big deal as life is very depended here on males. It didn't seem like there is anything that women can do on their own here, it was very weird and shocking change. Many here didn't have any idea about education for women here, there clearly weren't any opportunities that I could take. Everything was so home oriented here, I don't know how to explain. Life here was literally living in a room, hanging out with neighbors at home, waiting for husband, cooking etc. and same thing over and over again. You know where I am going, there wasn't any exposure to outside world. But eventually after 6-7 years I found a place where they had Islamic classes for women, and I joined those classes.

Another Indian national reflected on her life in Saudi Arabia and the limited opportunities for expatriate females to find employment. She compared the opportunities in the kingdom with those in India:

I agree that the standard of living in Saudi is way higher than that of India. But I also found it very gloomy and dull. Even the schools and children I saw here felt like had a life in a bubble. I assumed that the student life does not teach much about life and socializing here. And I have experienced that with my children as well so I know that is the case. I genuinely wanted to get back home for my education, as well as for my children's education. There are pros and cons to every place. But if you want to know if I wanted to get back home for education, yes I wanted to.

This interviewee was more critical about her life and the choices women have in Saudi than the other females. Her negative remarks reflect the limited freedom some females experience and explain her restricted social and educational options in the country. Unlike the Saudi women, her point of reference was her life in India and the society she left behind.

The research on expatriate workers in Saudi Arabia is very limited. Most of the expatriate studies have focused on legal issues and the still prevailing Kafala system that is used in many of the GCC countries in addition to Lebanon and Jordan. The sponsorship system requires a national to sponsor the employee to work and reside in the country. It has contributed to abuses based on the sponsor's control over the individual. Employees, especially from less developed countries, are rendered almost without any rights (Naithani & Jha, 2009). Research focused on the lives of expatriate housewives who, like the above noted interviewee, followed her husband to Saudi Arabia, is extremely limited. The commentaries suggest that many of these women were unable to

gain employment and often live in expatriate communities without any ties to the host society due to language problems, legal restrictions, and limited work opportunities.

One student's reflection highlighted the overall benefits and outcomes of this assignment. She, like many of her classmates, discovered new and intriguing information about her female family members. These revelations convey many societal and cultural nuances that have been lost or forgotten by members of developing countries. They support a need for oral history in today's societies and classrooms:

This assignment has been very captivating as it revealed many hidden information about my family and opened my eyes on the leadership styles of everyone. Making me think and analyze the family and its past more than I ever did. At the end, I believed that oral history should be part of every family's gathering as it keeps the traditions, stories, and knowledge alive within the next generations. It also reveals the differences between the past and present life, making links from every piece of information you receive. Therefore, grandchildren, including myself, should be more curious and ask about the details of their family's past.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted a unique project focused on the acquisition of female oral histories in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Overall, the oral history approach for teaching World Civilization, World Geography and Leadership was very successful. Students were engaged and able to relate much better to the interviews they conducted than to a textbook. The analysis confirmed similar findings from previous feminist studies and oral history projects.

Student reflections summed up how valuable this experience was and how it made them re-evaluate their family, country, and heritage. They noted how important it was to learn about their past through the lens of their female members using an important Arabian tradition. Most students emphasized that oral history is an important part of their development and how it exposed many "secrets" whether deliberately hidden or merely put aside due to the family's modernization.

The excerpts revealed great diversity amongst the women depending upon various factors such as age, experiences, country of origin, and level of education. They also exposed how dramatically life has changed for women in the kingdom over a short period of time and a few generations. Many of the students expressed their surprise at learning how difficult life was in the past for their grandmothers in particular. They stated that these women were the backbone of their family and had learned to be strong due to difficult circumstances experienced during their early years.

The interviewees also placed their stories and experiences in the larger context of the family. Many of the women interviewed stoically and emotionlessly described how their fate was affected by for example the death of a close relative or a forced marriage to a much older man. This typically female narrative style was reinforced in the interviews by a strong reference to the husband whose fate filtered through in all of the grandmother and mother reports. There were very few women who did not focus on their families and husbands and presented themselves and their life from a more autonomous perspective.

How and what the women talked about in the interviews sheds some light on the enigmatic life of Saudi females. It allows an outsider to appreciate how women, like those above, have adapted to the highly regulated culture in which they live. In their interviews, the women

repeatedly pointed out their limited possibilities, be it financial, education or even for independent decision-making. Traumatic experiences, such as marriages as minors and divorce shortly afterwards, were mentioned almost casually. Equally casual were the comments on the limited scope for freedom and decision that the women had, especially when it came to life changing decisions such as the choice of partner, place of residence, education and career path. This in no way shows the indifference or subjugation of these women to the patriarchal system, but rather how they successfully navigated and adapted to the culture and society.

In addition to the restrictions imposed on women, the interviews also revealed moments of and the freedoms they fought for. Women who had lost their husbands at an early age had to find their own ways to support their families and found alternative ways of earning a living. Mothers with very little formal education fought for their daughter's future and provided them with the opportunity to study and to choose their own career path.

Finally, the interviews allowed us a rare glimpse into the life of the older generation of Saudi women, who by no means had the opportunities the younger generation of women in the kingdom have and certainly not the opportunities experienced by the authors' students. It is this discrepancy between the generations that is particularly striking. Many students were surprised, frightened and even shocked by the fate of their grandmothers, aunts and mothers and started to think about their own lives and the possibilities of their generation. It is this point that allows a positive conclusion. Most of these situations may shock and amaze those from a Western perspective, however, much has changed for the good and for Saudi women in general. This is especially true for the educated urban middle class from which our students come than for women from less privileged families.

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