

# Women's Rights Organizations in Saudi Arabia and France



University at Buffalo The State University of New York

Angie Quilla, Jocelyne Bello, Angela Hyeji Kim

Research Mentor: Colleen Culleton



## Abstract:

Women activists in Saudi Arabia and France are working to gain more rights for women. In France, the country with the highest percentage of women in government, women's equality means having more women appear in higher positions of leadership in business and government. When, on the other hand, in Saudi Arabia laws for women are more restricting. Women's role in the public sphere is very limited. Our group is researching different organizations in these two countries working for women's rights in their respective contexts. We ask the question "What is each activist group from each country fighting for and what methods are they using?" This project demonstrates how women activists' approaches differ from each other between these two countries.

## Saudi Arabia:

### History:

Women's role in Saudi Arabia is determined by what the Koran states, as well as interpretations of Sunni Islam. Most of the Islamic laws come from the Koran. There are many ways the Koran can be translated, but Saudi Arabia mostly follows what Sharia translates the Koran to be saying. One being the necessity of a male guardian at all times. It is frequently repeated that the rules women must follow are not religious but only of cultural. Many women do not want to change the way the culture is already. Saudi Arabia is the country that follows most of the Islamic rules compared to the other Islamic countries. A country being able to keep its culture is a great honor and cause for admiration. In the past decade Saudi Arabia has given women a number of privileges that they once did not have.

- 1979, due to the Iranian Revolution, fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia demanded a more conservative Islamic state, which includes "an end of education of women." Additionally, it became mandatory to wear the *abaya* in public.
- 2011, women were given the right to vote in local elections.
- 2011, women were given the chance to run for local election and for the Consultative Assembly.
- 2015, the work force consists of 13% women, even though more women are graduating from Saudi Arabian Universities.

### Saudi Arabia Women's Activist Movement Now:

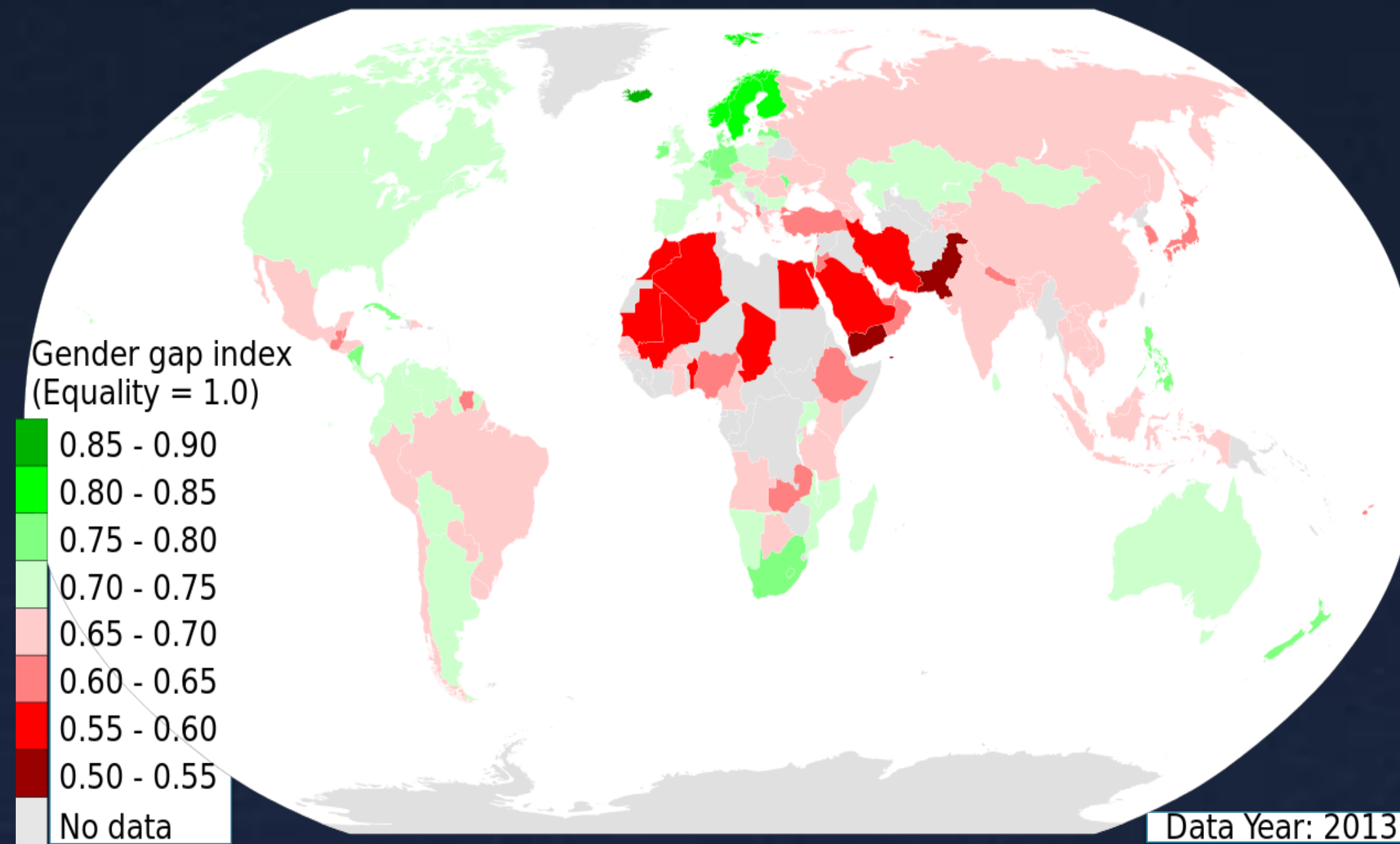
Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world that prohibits women from driving. There is no written law, but the licenses needed to drive an automobile are only given to men. The religious authorities, the Muttawah, have declared that women driving is Haram, forbidden by Islamic law which is written after the Quran. Since women's rights organizations are banned in Saudi Arabia, women have started unofficial groups that are seen as criminal acts. The women participating in any of these acts are seen as criminals and may be arrested.

- 1990, dozens of women drove cars in Riyadh and were arrested by religious police. Their passports were confiscated, but given back a year later. They were put under surveillance from then on.
- 2007, Wajeha al-Huwaider had a thousand women sign a petition sent to King Abdullah for their rights to drive.
- 2008, Wajeha al-Huwaider posted a video on YouTube of her driving on International Women's Day. She declared it her campaign women2drive
- 2011, two women that were caught driving were sentenced to be whipped. King Abdullah overturned the sentences a week after.
- 2014, Women driving is seen as a form of "Terrorism." Two Arabic women who were detained for driving were sentenced to Saudi terrorism court.

### Women's Rights Activist:

Wajeha al-Huwaider was a journalist for Daily Al-Watan and Daily Arab News, before she was banned from publishing.

- 2003, Wajeha al-Huwaider was arrested for running a protest for women's rights and was banned from leaving Saudi Arabia. The ban was later lifted.
- 2011, was charged with kidnapping. She attempted to help a woman escape to the Canadian embassy to get away from her husband.
- 2013, She was arrested for about a year and banned to travel after being charged with Takhbib, speaking about power separation of husband and wife.



### Burqas in France:

On September 14, 2010 the French Parliament banned the wearing of clothing that would cover one's face, this included the *niqab* and *burqa*. France is the only nation that has banned any Islamic face covering (Belgium banning only the full body veil). This has influenced many of the other European countries, where certain municipalities have banned the full Islamic veil and/or *burqa* only. France's reasoning for this ban is said to be the separation of religion and state. By wearing a *burqa* or *niqab* in public it is considered a religious showing which is what France wants to eliminate.

- 2010 Italy, Novara banning any clothing that obstructs identification. This included the *burqini*, the full body cover used by Muslim women.
- 2010 Spain, Barcelona bans *burqa* and *niqabs* from specific public places such as parks.
- 2013 Switzerland, in Ticino the public voted a ban on veils that covered one's full face. Includes *burqas* and *niqabs*.
- 2013 Russia, North Caucasus bans headscarves to prevent any hostility between Russians and Muslims in public schools.



## France:

### History:

The focus for women's rights goes back to the French revolution. In the late 1960s during the women's liberation movement, woman such as Antoinette Fouque spoke up for women's rights. She believed that more had been done for women in the last forty years than the last two million years in history. Before the suffrage movement women were seen as wives, mothers and daughters. Therefore, women wanted to reject domestic oppression. Simone de Beauvoir and Gisele Hamili founded the French Movement for Family Planning in 1956 in order to support the decisions of women who wanted to choose their own destinies. Many rights have been given to women such as the right to vote. This has made an impact in politics where women have the opportunity to open more doors for each other. Women are working together for a common goal and the demand for more rights in the work force is another important ideal in many women's organizations.

### French Women Activist Movement Now:

France has a large number of women's activist groups and organizations. They all have different goals ranging from equal parents' custody, rights for abortion, women's role in government, and women's stereotypes portrayed by the media. In the year 2014 Najat Vallaud, the Minister for women's rights, proposed law changes that would guarantee women equal rights. In 2014 France updated these laws:

- Political parties will be fined if they do not have equal representation of men and women listed for election. France will increase their fines for the Parliamentary election in 2017.
- Abortion in France has been legal since 1975, only now, it will be much easier to have an abortion done, the pregnant woman will only have to state that she no longer wants to pursue her pregnancy. There is punishment for anyone who stops a woman from getting information on abortions or denies doing the procedure.
- Establish equal rights of women in the work area. Large companies need at least 40% women in any decision making boards.
- Protections for women who are suffering through domestic violence. Protection time will be lengthened to 6 months instead of only 4 months.
- Stop sexist stereotypes in the media. Journalist students in university will be taught about this in their training.
- Beauty contest for girls under the age of 13 will be illegal.

### Women's Rights Activist:

Samira Bellil became famous for her autobiographical book *Dans l'enfer des tourmantes*.

- 1986, as a 14 years old girl, Samira Bellil was repeatedly gang-raped and got expelled from her family.
- 2002, she wrote a book dedicated to those of girls who had traumatic memory to overcome.
- 2002, she participated founding a young women's activist group, Ni Putes Ni soumises (Neither whores nor submissive), which consistently addressed the violence against young women in France.
- Due to her book and activist group Ni Putes Ni soumises, French government and the mayor's office in Paris scrutinized violence against young women.

**NI PUTES NI SOUMISES**

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