



# Countering Stereotypes About Saudi Arabian Women

*An Interview with Noura Alturki*

*2009 Yale Women, Religion and Globalization Fellow*

Interviewed by Andrea Blanch, PhD

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# COUNTERING STEREOTYPES ABOUT SAUDI ARABIAN WOMEN

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**Noura Saleh Alturki** is a 2009 Yale Fellow on *Women, Religion and Globalization* from Saudi Arabia. Prior to coming to Yale, she was manager of development projects at the Khadijah Bint Khuwailid Businesswomen Center, a women's lobbying and empowerment organization in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia affiliated with the Chamber of



Commerce and Industry. Alturki completed her undergraduate degree in Environmental Studies at Brown University and holds an MSc in Nature, Society, and Environmental Policy from the University of Oxford. Her graduate dissertation, *“From homemakers to industrial workers: Gendered ideologies, economic realities, and women’s employment in rural Saudi Arabia”* (2006) focused on the tension between cultural traditions proscribing a domestic role for women and economic forces pushing women into the workforce in a rural village in southwestern Saudi Arabia.

**Q: You spend a lot of time trying to educate people about Saudi Arabia. What mistaken impressions do people have about your country?**

I am often in the position of representing my country just by virtue of the fact that for many people, I’m the only Saudi they have ever met. My experience of Saudi Arabia has been shaped by so many factors, including class, gender, ethnicity, and geography. I grew up in Jeddah, which is considered to be diverse and liberal. I went to private school and later went abroad for higher education. Since moving back to Saudi Arabia, I have spent a lot of time conducting research and interacting with women and men of different social backgrounds in rural and urban areas.

Saudi Arabia is often perceived as “stuck” – caught in the past, trapped between traditional values and a modern world. Saudi Arabia is also seen as closed off from the outside world. It’s often described as a “conservative desert kingdom” – a bit of exoticism there! In reality, it’s a society that is in transition and experiencing incredible reform. It’s true that regular tourists can’t access Saudi Arabia – you can come only on business or for the pilgrimage. International tourism is not well developed yet, and if you said you wanted to come to Saudi Arabia, the typical local response would be “To do what?” But Saudi Arabian society is opening up quickly. Some think it is not happening quickly enough and others want it to slow down. In many ways the pace of change is dictated by a desire to encourage positive and lasting results, without pushing society too far outside its comfort zone.

**Q: What are some of the ways in which Saudi Arabia is opening up?**

On one level, it’s through economic development and specifically “foreign direct investment” or FDI – an effort to attract investors. Another example is the recent effort by the government to develop academic partnerships with premier western universities – for example, the King Abdullah University for Science and Technology will have faculty from all over the world. These international campuses will bring western academic institutions into the middle of Saudi society and will be a force for change – for example, it may make it difficult to maintain segregation of male and female students. We’ll see if it really happens. There has also been an increase in scholarships for students—male and female—to pursue higher education abroad. Finally, there’s the major government reshuffle that happened in February of this year. You may have read about it in the papers: The King appointed new ministers in key government bodies with the aim of speeding up educational and judicial reforms. There was a lot of international media coverage, especially of the fact that a woman was appointed as a Deputy Minister and that the head of the religious establishment was replaced.

**Q: What about the role of women?**

Reality is complicated. There is violence and injustice against women everywhere in the world. People learn to work with the situation and at the same time try to change it. Yes, the experience of men and women in Saudi Arabia is very different from that in the west, but don’t assume that your way is what everyone aspires to. Our aim has never

been to become a replica of the west. Saudis feel strongly that they want to create their own path based on the values that are most important to them. The average woman in Saudi Arabia doesn't perceive herself as oppressed, most women don't describe themselves that way. They see that they lack opportunities, they may feel bored or idle, and legal recourse - although available - is more difficult to access. Saudi women see these things as problems to be solved, not evidence that they are "oppressed." Women in Saudi Arabia have always worked – as entrepreneurs, as part of the family business, in the public sector, in agriculture. In many cases, women don't work *not* because they are not "allowed" to, but because they don't want to, they don't need to, or because of a lack of job opportunities or skills. Domestic violence exists, but it's no more acceptable there than it is here. To assume that domestic violence is "normal" in Saudi Arabia is flat wrong – and it's dehumanizing.

**Q: What is the socioeconomic and demographic make-up of Saudi Arabia? Saudis are often portrayed as either extremely rich or totally impoverished. Is there any diversity? What about interfaith dialogue?**

It's funny you say that because the majority of people I encounter are surprised to hear that there are poor people in Saudi Arabia. Even Saudis are shocked sometimes when they learn about the extent of poverty that exists, since it is a wealthy country and health care and public schooling are free. But poverty does exist and the majority of the population does worry about making ends meet. Before the oil boom, we were a very poor country, but this has changed. However, our middle class remains very small. The Governor of the Makkah Region has adopted a new slogan that reflects the goal of making Saudi Arabia among the ranks of countries known as being "first world".

There are many diverse groups in Saudi Arabia but there is limited interaction between them. Guest workers, for example, include foreign oil company workers (largely from the US), domestic workers (mostly from the Philippines) and manual laborers (from Pakistan, Bangladesh.) There are some people who come on Hajj (Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca) and overstay their visas – these are mostly Africans and Afghanis. And of course we have both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. The majority (95%) of Saudis are Sunni, the Shi'a are primarily in the Eastern Province. Some national efforts have been launched in the past several years to promote conversation and understanding, such as the National Dialogue and King Abdullah's Interfaith Dialogue project. I was also really excited to hear that for the first time, the Council of Senior Scholars includes

representatives of all major Sunni schools of thought. This is an important step towards tolerating and embracing diversity

**Q: What are the things you love most about your country?**

For me, Saudi Arabia is home, family, social life, friendship, the beach! I love Arabic humor and the Arabic language. I love our Saudi youth, their energy, their insights and ambitions. And I love being able to pray whenever, wherever I am. In Saudi, praying is part of the routine of life. It's not a matter of religious freedom, because the whole country is one faith group. But it's a common language, a common cultural expression that we all share.

**Q: What changes do you expect to see in Saudi Arabia over the next ten years?**

The truth is I don't know. As an environmentalist, I'm skeptical of huge development projects. They create more opportunities for international business to come in to the country, but who can predict what the ultimate impact will be? We are seeing more consultants, journalists, etc, but I'm cautious about making predictions about what will change and what won't.

**Q: What is your biggest frustration as a Saudi woman trying to educate people about your country?**

You're right that sometimes it's frustrating. However, for the most part I've found that people are receptive to hearing my perspective. If it's frustrating it's because some of the negative images are so embedded that it is easy for people to dismiss me as an exception. When someone says to me that I'm not typical, I want to respond, "You mean I'm not *stereotypical*."

People sometimes visit Saudi Arabia and then go back to their countries and write wonderful things about us. I always want to respond: No, that's not how it is. Or they deride it unfairly and that's not how it is, either. Saudi Arabia isn't wonderful and it isn't terrible, it's a real place. I think it's important that we stop forcing false comparisons. It drives people into defensiveness and is simply not helpful. As a Saudi activist, I'm aware of the local challenges, and I'm working to make it a better place.