Bargaining With Patriarchy: Women's Subject Choices and Patriarchal Marriage Norms

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Abstract

This paper discussed the influence of marriage on Saudi women's education. The majority of participants agree that marriage is as important as education and careers. According to the interviews, some female students and lecturers support women's traditional roles. These participants believe that the home is the natural place for a woman and that being a housewife is a fundamental role for a woman. Thus, they see a woman who cares about her husband as helping him to excel in his work. Additionally, if she takes care of her children, she serves the community better than if she goes to work. It is clear that those participants hold internalised gender roles. Although most of the female participants agree that motherhood is significant for women, they act differently when they have to choose between their studies and marriage. It appears from the participants' responses that being a mother and having children are very serious decisions. However, unlike in the past, they no longer look only to marry and have children, as marriage is one of their lesser concerns. The participants were divided into three categories in terms of their attitudes towards marriage. Although most of the participants have internalised traditional marriage norms, their attitudes towards marriage vary greatly. They exercise agency by resisting or bargaining with patriarchal systems. The first category of participants consists of those who resist the patriarchal system by exercising their legitimate Islamic rights. This includes women who ask for a divorce to eliminate the influence of their husband on their education. The second category comprises those who bargain with patriarchal influences by postponing marriage until after they graduate from university. Finally, there are participants who comply with patriarchal norms without negotiating or bargaining. They get married at an early age and accept the influence of their husband on their education. They limit their choices to certain subjects in order to maximise their marriage opportunities. This group of participants mainly studies traditional subjects such as education, as these subjects do not conflict with their family responsibilities. Furthermore, they avoid professions that might require evening-shift hours, such as nursing or medicine.

Keywords: Gender internalization, Patriarchal System, Marriage Norms, Higher Education.

Introduction and Background

When it comes to the construction of gender expectations in Saudi Arabia it is advisable to take into consideration three different factors, which are religion, traditions and patriarchy. The construction of gender in Saudi Arabia is a result of the interplay of social norms, the patriarchal system and Islam. The patriarchal system in Saudi Arabia is rooted in the social, economic and educational institutions (Doumato, 2010). The word patriarchy is a Greek word (William, 1994) and it means the rule of the father (Bhasin, 1993).

Fathers or men generally in patriarchal societies have power over women in both public and private spheres. There are many researchers who define patriarchy in different ways but with the same content; for example, Bhasin (1993) states that patriarchy is related to, "male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (p. 3).

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Walby defines patriarchy, "as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1990, p. 20). According to Lerner (1986) men in a patriarchal society are seen as strong, wise, and superior, whilst women are seen as powerless and immature mentally and emotionally. Patriarchy manifests itself differently from one society to another and from one culture to another. In Arab societies as Joseph (2010) proclaims, there is a hierarchy where the men have power over women and elderly men and women have power over young men and women. Saudi Arabia, like other Arab countries, has its culturally specific gender ideology, which shapes power relations and the roles of men and women. Accordingly, Saudi men and women are socially and culturally expected to act and behave in certain ways that fit the Saudi social and cultural norms.

Typically, women who live in a patriarchal society are powerless, especially in the public sphere, whilst men hold power in both spheres (Moghdam, 1992). In a patriarchal society, the duties of women are mainly centred on women as mothers and wives who bring up children in accordance with the social expectations and norms, as well as providing emotional support to their husbands (Joseph, 2010). In terms of Saudi society, the main role of women is homemaking and childrearing (Sabbagh, 1996). This could explain why Saudi women are underrepresented in social, economic and political spheres.

Nonetheless, women under the conditions of a patriarchal system such as in Saudi Arabia can adopt two actions. Kandiyoti (1988) argues that women can either challenge the patriarchal constraints or find alternatives in order to exercise their power. Furthermore, a Saudi woman can gain power when she gets married. Al-Torki (1986) stated that older women in Jeddah (a city located in the western region of Saudi Arabia) hold power over their children and grandchildren in terms of their marriage decisions. As reported by Al-Torki (1986) older married women can be mediators between the young household members and the head of the household, in order to obtain the head of the family's (the father's) approval. This form of female adjustment to the patriarchal system turns them into active agents even within the system that has suppressed them. Despite the constraints faced by Saudi women, they can still make agentic choices.

Therefore, the predominant image of Saudi women in the West as powerless and voiceless, as portrayed by some of the Western media, is far from the reality. It can be said that under the conditions of a patriarchal system Saudi women may be marginalised in some areas, but they also can gain power in others. The social changes that have been experienced by Arab societies because of modernization and globalization have contributed to the improvement of women's conditions through the weakening of the patriarchal system. The changes in women's social positions have come about through a combination of long-term macro-level processes, notably industrialization, urbanisation, proletarianisation, demographic transition, globalisation and forms of collective actions that include national liberation movements, revolutions and social movements (Moghadam, 2014).

As Joseph (2010) mentions, patriarchy in Arab countries like anywhere else takes various forms. In Saudi Arabia, a male guardian or mahram is a manifestation of the patriarchal system. Saudi women are not able to travel, work or study without their male guardian's permission (Al-Fayez, 1978; Keene, 2003). The male guardian could be a father or brother. In the case of a married woman her husband is her male guardian. Women in Saudi Arabia cannot access the courts without a male guardian to identify her. Since by law, a Saudi woman should wear a veil in public areas, she should bring her male guardian to verify her identity to the judge (Doumato, 2010). In general, family is the essence of the patriarchal system, therefore Muslim family laws are entrenched with the traditional gender roles and undermine women's agency. Family laws in the modern Arab world are a mixture of laws derived from the schools of Islamic jurisprudence, Western laws and tribal traditions (Moghadam, 2014). The conservative forces as represented by clerics (who support patriarchal gender roles) play a major role in the enactment of such family laws. In Saudi society tribal affiliation is another patriarchal unit. As a result, Saudi women should behave according to their tribal norms, either in terms of their educational or occupational choices. Moghadam (2014) reported that tribal identity "is based on blood ties which is patriarchal in the classic sense" (p. 118).

This paper focuses on how agency plays out and is used by different types of Saudi women. It shows how Saudi women exercise their agency through resisting and bargaining with the patriarchy. It also examines how they act when they have to choose between their studies and marriage.

Methodology

This is a feminist study concerning women's experiences in higher education. This study also recognises women as active agents that resist patriarchal constraints. Women's agency varies depending on her class. Accordingly, women's agency in this study is the producer of knowledge. The research methods and methodology were designed to explore how gender norms influence women's educational choices in order to answer the research questions. Using semi-structured interviews assisted me in answering the questions of my study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a hundred female students and lecturers to hear women's accounts regarding their subject choices. My position in the field influenced the research design and process. In addition, reflexivity was a key part of the research process, thus I gave my own input into this study. Being an insider researcher was empowering for me. It was easy to communicate with my participants since I am a woman and speak Arabic. During the interviews, my participants felt relaxed in expressing their views.

Results and Discussion

The majority of participants agree that marriage is as important as education and careers. According to the interviews, some female students and lecturers support women's traditional roles. These participants believe that the home is the natural place for a woman and that being a housewife is a fundamental role for a woman. Thus, they see a woman who cares about her husband as helping him to excel in his work. Additionally, if she takes care of her children, she serves the community better than if she goes to work. It is clear that those participants hold internalised gender roles. Although most of the female participants agree that motherhood is significant for women, they act differently when they have to choose between their studies and marriage.

It appears from the participants' responses that being a mother and having children are very serious decisions. However, unlike in the past, they no longer look only to marry and have children, as marriage is one of their lesser concerns. The participants were divided into three categories in terms of their attitudes towards marriage. Although most of the participants have internalized traditional marriage norms, their attitudes towards marriage vary greatly. They exercise agency by resisting or bargaining with patriarchal systems. The first category of participants consists of those who resist the patriarchal system by exercising their legitimate Islamic rights. This includes women who ask for a divorce to eliminate the influence of their husband on their education. The second category comprises those who bargain with patriarchal influences by postponing marriage until after they graduate from university. Finally, there are participants who comply with patriarchal norms without negotiating or bargaining. They get married at an early age and accept the influence of their husband on their education. They limit their choices to certain subjects in order to maximise their marriage opportunities. This group of participants mainly studies traditional subjects such as education, as these subjects do not conflict with their family responsibilities. Furthermore, they avoid professions that might require evening-shift hours, such as nursing or medicine.

1. Bargaining or resisting patriarchal constraints through exercising limited agency

Based on my participants' views, many Saudi girls are currently committed to the principle of completing their education; if their spouses refuse, they will ask for a divorce. According to these female participants, getting an education and a job has become the obsession of Saudi women. Basically, they do not feel that it is necessary to get married, as they view marriage as an obstacle to completing their education. Some participants suggest that university specialisations could affect women's roles as mothers and wives in terms of their presence in the house and their attention to the affairs of their children and husbands. As a consequence, the participants indicate that, in Saudi society, men prefer women who do not complete their studies because the men do not want their wives to be smarter or more educated. Some participants are reluctant to get married whilst they are studying, because they think that this would be a commitment and a great responsibility that would stand in the way of their ambitions; they do not see themselves in marriages where they are sitting at home, cooking, cleaning, and raising children.

However, a few participants reveal that their reason for delaying or avoiding marriage is to travel by studying abroad in order to explore life. It appears that the patriarchal constraints in Saudi society are an obstacle that prevents Saudi women from getting married during their education, as some participants feel that most men are opposed to the idea of their wives being successful and having jobs, because these men do not want their wives to be better than them in any area.

To understand why participants have different attitudes towards marriage, it is worth discussing this observation within the agency framework. Some of the participants make agentic choices by bargaining with patriarchal systems. The term 'patriarchal bargaining,' was developed by Kandiyoti (1988), who described the tactics adopted by women to obtain power under patriarchal conditions. Feminist movements have focused on women's agency and on making changes through collective action to fight gender power relationships (Eduards, 1994). There are four options for women to approach the patriarchal system: resistance, bargaining, instrumental agency, and compliant agency (Avishai, 2008). For the purpose of this study, I mostly focused on the bargaining and resistance approaches.

In light of the concepts of agency and patriarchal bargaining, it could be argued that Saudi female students and lecturers follow the resistance and bargaining approaches in terms of exhibiting their agency. In a conservative and religious society such as Saudi Arabia, participants very often exhibit agency within the limits of religion, customs, and traditions. The participants in this study exercise limited powers, which they gain from bargaining with the patriarchal system. This, "limited form of agency" was mentioned by Phillips (2006), who studied gay people's choices whether to reveal their sexual identities. Accordingly, women in this study are active agents who bargain with the patriarchal system to acquire power. However, their agency is limited. For example, on the issue of marriage, girls' education may be in conflict with their chances of getting married, particularly when they study a socially unacceptable specialty.

2. Exercising legitimate Islamic rights is a tactical strategy to avoid a husband's influence

As previously mentioned, participants are divided into categories based on their attitudes towards marriage. Less than one tenth of the participants got married when they were in high school. Some married participants resisted their husband's influence on their studies by asking for a divorce. Participants in this category felt that they did not have the right to choose what they wanted to study because their husbands would not give them the freedom to do so. Their husbands forced them to study certain subjects because of Ikhtilat or conflicts with their family responsibilities. As a result, some married participants asked for a divorce to exercise the right to choose their field of study. Amal, a nursing lecturer, ended her marriage so it could not influence her subject choice; she clarified:

"I was married when I was in high school, and when my ex-husband knew that I wanted to study nursing, he categorically refused and made me choose between him and studying nursing. I chose to study nursing, and, eventually, we separated. Since then, I have become labelled as a divorced woman because of my choice to study nursing. He believed that the nursing profession undermined the dignity of women. He used to say he did not want to marry a nurse, as if nurses were belly dancers, for example. He said he did not mind if I wanted to study medicine, but not nursing. After my first marriage, many men asked for my hand, but they changed their minds when they learned that I was studying nursing. Honestly, there is a view that nurses are inferior."

Amal's awareness of Islamic laws helped her to find laws that help women. She found the right of divorce to be a useful tactic in staying independent in terms of choosing her career. Although her tactics eliminated the influence of her husband, they did not challenge it. Ibtisam, a media studies student, revealed that: "Currently, many Saudi women are committed to the principle of completing their education; even if their spouses refuse, they will ask for a divorce." According to the Prophet, "[n]ever did God allow anything more hateful to him than divorce" (Abu Dawud, n,d, p. 3). Hence, divorce in Islam is, "the most hateful of all permitted" (Ali, 1985, p. 2). Although divorce is discouraged by Islam, it is permitted when a marriage seems impossible to continue. As a result, some participants find divorce to be a way of eliminating the influences that their husband has on their educational choices. It could be said that some participants resist patriarchal constraints by obtaining divorces.

Another form of patriarchal bargaining is an obliging husband allowing his wife to complete her education and writing this down in the marriage contract. Some Saudi men agree to allow their wives to work, but very often, they change their minds after marriage. Accordingly, they force their wives to sit at home and look after the children. For fear of this situation, women who want to study in a discipline such as medicine, law, nursing, or engineering stipulate in their marriage contracts that their spouses must allow them to work. In this way, participants can maintain their right to work after marriage. Sawzan, a law student, expressed her fears of not being able to work after being married:

"Look, let us talk realistically, it is hard to find a Saudi man who allows his wife to work in the courts. Therefore, if I get married I will ask the Sheikh to write down in my marriage contract that my husband cannot oppose my work in the courts."

Sawsan was able to choose to study law, which is a male dominated profession, because she is unmarried; thus, in her case, there was no influence of a husband on her educational choice. However, she is worried that a future husband could prevent her from working because courts are mixed-gender places. Therefore, her tactic to avoid the influence of a husband on her work is to place conditions on any marriage contract. By doing this, she has guaranteed her right to work. Husbands can prevent their wives from continuing their education after marriage due to a fear of losing authority. This is particularly the case when a husband holds a lower degree than his wife. This incompatibility in education between spouses may make a husband feel inferior, and he may thereby prevent his wife from working. Jihan, a chemistry student, reported the following:

 "When I got married, I asked my husband to allow me to continue my higher education, and I placed this as a condition in my marriage contract. . . . I did this because my aunt stopped her studies due to her husband's refusal."

In Islamic marriage contracts, legally, a woman's husband must treat her in a certain way; for example, he must allow her to work and complete her studies. Therefore, for fear of being deprived of being able to work after marriage, some participants require it to be written in the marriage contract that their husband must allow them to work or continue their education after marriage. A breach of this condition gives a woman the right to ask for a divorce. In this way, participants protect their right to work and study to the extent permitted by Islam.

On the other hand, the decision to choose a specialisation could be a fateful one for participants, because it depends on their priorities, such as motherhood or their career. The participants' awareness of the constraints of the patriarchal system help them to gain some power. This is similar to what Gerami and Lehnerer (2001) found regarding Iranian women's bargaining with the patriarchal system, as Iranian women's knowledge of the patriarchal system contributed to undermining the system's influence on their lives. However, most female students in the current study expressed their willingness to work in any job except teaching. A job has become essential to young Saudi women, and they do not want to be financially dependent on men. They want to be independent human beings and effective members of society, as Samah, a biochemistry student, openly declared:

"I was frightened when I found that the job opportunities available to me are few. I want to get a job. I do not like sitting at home and asking my husband for money. I just do not like it. I want to feel that I am an active member of society. I want to be self-reliant, since I do not like waiting for someone to give me money. Participants resist the patriarchal system by challenging traditional gender roles. They do not accept being subject to marriage norms because they are noncompliant with the patriarchal stereotypes that men are breadwinners and women are homemakers.

3. Delaying Marriage as an agentic choice to avoid the family-education conflict

More than half of the interviewees believe that marriage may conflict with their studies. They think that if they get married, their husband will negatively influence their university education. Thus, they postpone marriage until after university so as not to affect their educational choices. This finding is consistent with those of Gubernskaya (2010), who found that women in Germany, the United States, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands hold non-traditional attitudes towards marriage and childbearing. The idea of postponing marriage until after graduation from university indicates female students' desires to get advanced degrees and proper jobs.

El-Haddad (2003) suggested that the spinsterhood phenomenon has become widespread in the Gulf countries amongst both women and amongst men. He attributed the prevalence of this phenomenon to the choice of remaining single, as marriage in the Gulf societies is no longer as socially valued as it was in the past. Other social standards are no less important than marriage, including obtaining an advanced academic degree and getting a decent job. By delaying their marriages, participants break from the traditional role of Saudi women. This shows that they want to avoid the negative impact that many husbands have on women's subject choices and completing higher education.

The participants may worry that they will not be able to balance their private and public responsibilities, and about their husband's potential refusal to let them complete their studies. Thus, postponing marriage could be caused by a fear of their husband's influence, as Fatima, a computer science student, revealed: "I consider marriage to be an obstacle to completing any girl's education. I currently do not think about marriage, because it is a commitment and a great responsibility that could stand in the way of my ambition. I also do not think of myself being married, since I cannot imagine myself staying at home cooking, cleaning, and raising my children. I want to travel and study abroad.

I want to explore this world. Additionally, the majority of husbands do not like their wives to be successful and independent; therefore, after marriage, they prevent their wives from continuing their education."

Another significant aspect of delaying the idea of marriage is the experiences of female relatives or friends, as Samar, a computer science student, revealed: "If I got married during my studies, it would negatively affect my education. My sister got married during her studies at university, and she was not able to balance family and her studies. She was studying computer science, which is difficult and requires effort and time. Three quarters of the girls in my class delayed marriage until after graduation. This means that Saudi girls are thinking more about their future. Surely, she does not trust her husband."

It can be concluded from the above information that participants appear to negotiate with the patriarchal constraints without changing them. They accept gender norms and power relations, whilst at the same time bargaining with the patriarchal system to maximize their choices. For instance, the roles of mother and wife are significant for Saudi women; hence, the idea of postponing marriage until after university is a tactical step that participants use to eliminate the possible negative influence that marriage may have on their education. In other words, delaying marriage might help them avoid the conflict between studying and women's traditional roles. The role of the wife in Saudi society, similar to that of other patriarchal societies, is limited to domestic work, such as cleaning, cooking, and childbearing. These family responsibilities are expected from Saudi women after marriage, but they could be a burden on women in addition to their studies or jobs.

This finding seems to be consistent with Barber and Axinn's (1998), who found that educational levels can influence the likelihood of women getting married. Women who want to complete their higher education and have careers are more likely to delay marriage or not get married. On the other hand, women who get married early often have no intention of pursuing higher education and are more likely to stay at home. Furthermore, this result is consistent with Ikamari's (2005) study, which showed that education has a great impact on women's age of marriage in Kenya; he found that whenever the educational level of Kenyan women increased, their likelihood of early marriage decreased. Ikamari highlighted that Kenyan women delay marriage to complete their education and revealed that Kenyan women in rural areas are more prone to early marriage than are those who live in urban areas.

Furthermore, Ikamari pointed out that Muslim women are more likely to marry early in life when compared to Protestant and Catholic women. Finally, Ikamari indicated that early marriage is less common amongst young women than amongst older women. These previous findings support those of the current study in terms of women's agency. Together, they suggest that women under patriarchal constraints can be either passive or active agents. Some women are more likely to bargain with the patriarchal system through tactics such as delaying marriage to continue higher education. However, other women comply with patriarchal constraints without resistance, for example, by getting married without completing higher education. Clearly, the findings of Ikamari (2005) and the present study show the positive effects of women's education on social norms. In the past, women in Saudi Arabia and Kenya got married at very young ages due to the dominant cultural and social traditions; however, this phenomenon of early marriage has been gradually phased out due to women's commitment to pursue education. Unlike Saudi society, Kenyan society has multiple ethnic groups.

Thus, postponing marriage is much more common amongst Kenyan women from Catholic and Protestant groups than amongst those from Muslim groups. This may be due to the fact that Islam promotes early marriage, as the Prophet of Islam himself married Aisha when she was 9 years old. This trend could also be due to cultural expectations of keeping women pure and protecting them from committing adultery. The changing age of first marriage amongst Saudi women could be attributed to modernisation and social changes in Saudi society. Although the participants in my study delayed getting married until they completed their higher education, delaying marriage is not accepted in Islam (Ayotola & A.H.M., 2015).

According to Islamic law, men and women should not have premarital sex. Therefore, Islam encourages early marriage to protect the chastity of both men and (especially) women and to protect them from committing adultery (Ayotola& A.H.M, 2015). Furthermore, this corroborates the ideas of Hoffnung (2004), who suggested that American women in their 20s mainly focus on career development. He also reported that American married women tend to hold bachelor's degrees and work in less-prestigious jobs than do unmarried women, who often hold advanced degrees. Finally, Hoffnung found that American married women appear to work in traditional jobs, such as teaching, to balance both family and work. From the findings of both Hoffnung (2004) and the present study, marriage could limit women's choices and their roles in the public sphere.

Women who study or work in non-traditional subjects or professions may sacrifice motherhood in exchange for their studies and careers. However, this result partly differs from that of Raymo (2003), who reported that the phenomenon of delayed marriage amongst Japanese women could be attributed to educational, social, and economic factors. Japanese women's preoccupation with completing higher education, which is shown in the high number of Japanese female students enrolled in universities, may distract them from thinking about marriage. Joining the advanced Japanese educational system has become psychologically and financially costly, and marriage may be an added burden to the other burdens that Japanese women face, such as taking care of elderly family members.

From the findings of previous studies and the current study, women across cultures believe that marriage is an impediment to obtaining academic degrees. This can be attributed to social expectations regarding women's roles, as the institution of marriage heavily relies on women. Japanese and American societies are more advanced than Saudi society in terms of women's rights and liberation. Although women still tend to do most of the domestic work in those countries, they have relatively equal rights in terms of participation in the public sphere. However, Saudi women have limited opportunities to participate in the public sphere due to the influences of patriarchal values, which are deeply rooted in Saudi society. Despite their cultural differences, these women share the same attitude towards marriage and education.

In a patriarchal society such as that of Saudi Arabia, where girls are raised to be mothers and wives, it is difficult for young women to give up such roles to study medicine or nursing. In Saudi society, married women are respected and appreciated because they are fulfilling their expected roles. On the other hand, unmarried women are seen as useless, unwanted spinsters. Some female students take responsibility for their decision to study medicine or nursing. I interviewed female students who are choosing to achieve their dreams of being doctors rather than getting married and being mothers. They know that they may not get married if they study medicine, and in spite of this, they still study it. This type of young woman exhibits agency not by challenging cultural beliefs and traditions, but rather by reacting differently towards them. Tahani is one of those young ladies; she proudly stated:

"Indeed, no one wants to marry a female doctor because she mixes with men, but we love to study medicine. Basically, it is not necessary that we get married. I want to live with my mom and dad. I want to become something important in society and then get married. It is not a problem if I do not get married. For me, marriage is the least of my interests." From the above information, it could be said that these participants are active agents who are not compliant with the patriarchal system and who do not bargain with it; rather, they resist it. Some participants resist the traditional gender roles, particularly those concerning marriage. They choose to complete their higher education instead of being mothers and wives. These participants exercise their agency by challenging social norms and the cultural expectations that perpetuate social inequality. Education, for them, is an empowering tool for achieving equality.

Although the majority of this study's participants are not aware of gender patterns, patriarchal systems, or other Western concepts, they are able to bargain with or resist patriarchal barriers and make agentic choices. All these participants aim to eliminate the influence that husbands have on their education. However, they use different tactics because they live in different conditions. In other words, they use the tactics that are available to them.

5. Compliance with patriarchal norms regarding marriage

Another important finding was the phenomenon of early marriage affecting girls' education. As previously stated, some of the participants married at an early age. Consequently, their husbands affected their education. Early marriage makes education subject to the husband's control.

Such participants are compliant with patriarchal influences regarding marriage norms because they restrict their choices to certain subjects that they think will not be in conflict with traditional roles. In this regard, Sawsan, a family education student, stated:

"I choose to study this field because I want to learn how to raise my children properly."

Although Sawsan's husband has not directly affected her educational choices, she feels that since she is a married woman, she should choose a subject that does not conflict with her family duties. However, some married participants' subject choices were influenced by their husband. For example, their husband may prevent them from studying certain fields, as Nouran, a medical physics student, stated:

"I had a friend who was studying medicine. After she got married, her husband asked her to change her major to art, and she did. I think husbands are one of the factors that influence women's field choices of field."

The internalisation of gender roles appears to influence the participants' views. Participants who have internalised gender norms tend to choose traditional subjects and professions that do not conflict with their socially expected roles. These participants choose to accept patriarchal influences without bargaining or resistance. Instead, they comply with the patriarchal system. They accept marriage at a young age and their husband's influence on their education, because they have internalised the traditional gender roles. Cultural expectations about gender roles influence the participants' views about their own abilities and qualities. These internalised cultural beliefs about gender direct some participants to choose certain subjects. The participants in this study appear to make gender-stereotypic decisions because they internalise the traditional gender roles. Even if subjects like engineering or aviation are available to women, these participants have difficulty allowing themselves to study such subjects. Ridgeway (2011) argued:

Embedded in gender stereotypes are status beliefs that associate men and their traits with higher status than women and their traits. . . . The status implications of gender stereotypes associate men with greater overall competence, understood as the ability to master events and accomplish goals, while also granting each sex some specialised skills. Thus, the content of gender stereotypes implies not only difference between the sexes but also inequality (p. 89).

Participants internalise traditional gender roles, and this internalisation influences their behaviour. In other words, holding beliefs in essentialised gender roles with regards to certain subjects could influence participants' attitudes and perceptions. Those participants who perceive subjects such as engineering, aviation, and politics as being in the masculine domain might think that such subjects require qualities that are inconsistent with female cultural expectations. Thus, they may question their abilities and eventually become less interested in studying such fields. Furthermore, participants may avoid stereotypically male subjects because of perceptions of their own qualities. They may feel that these activities are irrelevant or that they do not have the ability to perform them. As Bandura (1990) reported, "people's beliefs about their capabilities affect what they choose to do, how much effort they mobilise and how long they will persevere in the face of difficulties" (p. 9). However, the participants may be unconsciously influenced by the prevalent gender stereotypes, as clarified by Wood and Eagly (2010):

Although social categories such as gender may be automatically activated outside of awareness and without conscious intent, such activation does not always occur. Even when gender stereotypes have been activated, perceivers can control their potential effects on judgments, given sufficient motivation and cognitive resources. However, in the hurly-burly of daily life, people often lack the motivation or resources to exert this control (p. 637).

Participants who are influenced by this theme develop their identities in accordance with their expected roles, as stated by Freeman (2005), who found that Moroccan women construct independence in the context of their family's expectations of males and females. Apparently, early marriage can affect Saudi women's subject choices, as their husbands are dominant figures in the marital relationship. The present findings show that husbands influence their wife's decision about which subjects to study. This fits with the findings of Alexander and Reilly (1981), who suggested that early marriage affects women more than men in terms of educational attainment. This is because women have more family commitments than men.

Early marriage does also affect men, however. A detailed examination of the effect of early marriage in a study by Kerckhoff and Parrow (1979) showed that early marriage affects the educational attainment of male high school students. Although my participants believe that this phenomenon is more prevalent in villages and remote areas, they think that some families in cities and urban regions prefer to marry off their daughters at a young age. They confirm that young women who get married at an early age may not be able to pursue a university education or may drop out of university because of the opposition of their husband. They clarify that some husbands may believe that women should be familiar with reading and writing only, and that a high school education is enough. They also indicate that some husbands think women should stay at home to take care of their family. In contrast, according to my participants, some young women who get married when they are in high school choose not to pursue a university education, particularly if they are pregnant or have children. Ameerah, a physics lecturer, clearly stated that early marriage is a pervasive phenomenon:

"King Faisal was a brave man when he faced society as a whole and made education compulsory for women. We now need a brave decision to stop underage marriage. This phenomenon is abnormally widespread in Saudi Arabia. The argument is that the Prophet married Aisha when she was a child, but the Prophet married her to fulfil a divine order. There are also Hadiths that deny that the Prophet married Aisha when she was 10 years old, saying that she was 17 years old. Even if this is true, they are not prophets, and not all women are like Aisha."

The practice of early marriage in Saudi Arabia is justified by using the Prophet Mohammed as a role model, as the Prophet married Aisha when she was 9 years old and he was in his 50s. Although some people believe that the Prophet Mohammed married Aisha because of a divine order, there is no religious purpose for an elderly man to marry a child. Based on the participants' views, this phenomenon is very common in rural areas and less common in urban areas. Some fathers who live in villages marry off their young daughters for either social or economic reasons.

It is socially preferable for women in Saudi Arabia to marry as early as possible. Furthermore, the social expectation is for women in Saudi Arabia to be mothers, raise children, and take care of domestic work, which could cause not only parents, but also the girls themselves to accept marrying at a young age. Some fathers think that an early marriage can protect their daughters from committing sins or ending up in poverty. Interestingly, this finding goes hand in hand with that of Maertens (2013), who found that, in Indian villages, parents' educational aspirations for their daughters are lower than their educational aspirations for their sons. Maertens referred to these gender differences as social traditions, for the socially acceptable age of marriage in Indian villages is 18 for girls and 22 for boys. These data must be interpreted with caution because early marriage exists in Saudi society; however it is not very prevalent, as it has not become a phenomenon as it has in other countries.

 According to Singh and Samara (1996), the phenomenon of early marriage is most widespread in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; it is less prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa. Early marriage rates are lower in countries where most people hold high school certificates. In the same way, Raj et al. (2014) noted the impact of education on reducing early marriage rates in South Asia; they found that primary education is inadequate in minimising child marriage in countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and India. Conversely, Raj et al. identified secondary education as helping to limit child marriage in those countries. Similarly, Smith and Celikaksoy (2007) found that school dropout rates amongst immigrants in Denmark are high because of early marriage, which is common in that group.

Additionally, these findings mirror those obtained by Kaptanoğlu and Ergöçmen (2014), who showed that the incidence of early marriage in Turkey has been declining since the late 1970s. However, Kaptanoğlu and Ergöçmen revealed that early marriage is still prevalent amongst less-educated girls in some regions of Turkey, notably underdeveloped or rural areas. Although in Turkey the law prohibits child marriage, some customs and traditions are more powerful than laws. Kaptanoğlu and Ergöçmen indicated that some parents circumvent the law by marrying off their daughters through what is known as religious marriage. Overall, previous studies have demonstrated the link between education and early marriage. It is less common in urban areas and amongst educated families. Furthermore, a family's social and economic situation appears to play a role in the prevalence of early marriage. The most obvious finding to emerge from the analysis is that customs, traditions, and religion shape marriage in Saudi society. Most of the thoughts and practices related to marital life in other patriarchal societies are similar. Another result of compliance with the patriarchal system is the fear of spinsterhood.

A common perception amongst the participants is that Saudi men prefer to marry women who work in segregated workplaces and are reluctant to marry those who work in mixed workplaces. Some disciplines reduce the chances of a woman getting married, including medicine and nursing, which are amongst the specialties currently available at Saudi universities which some female students are reluctant to study. Female graduates and students in these disciplines are facing pressure from parents and society as a whole.

A woman who decides to study medicine or nursing sacrifices her future as a mother. The participants also emphasise that university laws do not support female students marrying whilst studying at medical colleges, because the period of maternity leave is only 1 week, compared to up to 3 months for married female students at other colleges. This is because of a difference in the study systems of the medical colleges and other colleges. In this context, Munira described the suffering of a female doctor who could not find someone to marry:

"The girl studied at the College of Medicine; no one would marry her, and she will become a spinster. She is one of the girls from our village, and she is older than me. She was the first girl from my village who studied medicine. One day, a guy from our village asked for her hand, and he made her choose between marrying him and leaving medical school, or not marrying him and staying in the school. She chose to carry on with her studies at medical college."

The fear of spinsterhood that causes this reluctance amongst Saudi female students to study disciplines such as medicine or nursing reveals the importance of marriage in the lives of these young women. As a result, some participants prefer to study traditional subjects such as education. This could be because such choices fit with traditions and customs related to not mixing with men, and choosing a career that is suitable for a married woman who has family commitments. As reported by Klasen and Lamanna (2009), the majority of women in Saudi Arabia work in the educational sector. Since the majority of this study's participants have internalised the traditional gender roles, they believe that their main purpose in life is to be a mother and a wife; any matter that interferes with these roles should be disregarded. On the phenomenon of the reluctance of Saudi men to marry female doctors, Nadeen, a chemistry lecturer, spoke at length about the current situation Saudi female doctors face as compared to their situation in the 1980s. She stated that the status of Saudi female doctors in the current period has significantly improved relative to their status in the past:

"The girl who studies medicine will not marry unless she is lucky enough to marry a male doctor, but our society is selfish and masculine. You will find that even the male doctor refuses to marry a female doctor; for example, male doctors always think that they are busy most of the time. Thus, they want to marry a woman who sits in the house, which is what we encounter in our society. Thus, girls are afraid to study medicine. However, I think that this view has recently changed. In my life twenty years ago, it was not recommended for a girl to study medicine. My twin sister studied medicine for two years, but she could not complete her studies because of disappointments, such as that she would never get married and would become a spinster. Consequently, she changed her subject to chemistry like I did. Currently, the situation is different; for example, I encourage my daughters to study medicine or engineering because they are new and available specialties. There is also a great demand for these disciplines. For example, my niece is studying law, and the other one is studying computer engineering."

This finding is inconsistent with those of Paker-William (2009), who found that educated African American women value marriage more than their mothers, who have negative perceptions of males and marriage; they do not want to be single female workers, but they prefer to have both a husband and a job. These young African American women have traditional attitudes towards female roles. They have learned from their mothers' contradictory perceptions of women's roles. They believe that women are equal to men, but at the same time, they see the husband as the mainstay of the house. Nourhan, a student, refuted the reasons that Saudi men say prevent them from marrying female doctors:

"For me, I do not want my brother to marry a female doctor—not because of Ikhtilat but because she will be busy. Whoever marries a female doctor has to get used to her sometimes neglecting her home and her husband, as this is beyond her capacity. The role of women in the house is great. There is no difference if a man is a doctor or a teacher. Men can spend long hours working outside the home, but a mother's presence in the home is necessary."

Some female students have decided not to study medicine or nursing from the beginning for fear of spinsterhood or not getting married. Some female students also have challenged society and joined medical or nursing schools. These two subjects are socially unacceptable because of Ikhtilat, as men work in hospitals and dispensaries. However, a husband's family can also have a negative attitude towards women who study or work in nursing; Neermin, another lecturer at a nursing school, addressed the attitude of her mother-in-law:

"When my husband proposed to me, he did not tell his family that I was studying nursing; instead, he told them that I was studying medicine. Even when his mother came to our house, she said to my mother, 'We want your daughter for my son because she is a doctor.' However, whensheknew wthat I was studyingnursing, sheflooded me with hurtful questionssuch as whether I wouldinject a needleinto a patient's body. However, praise be to Allah, I proved myself and became a lecturer in our department."

As a consequence, there is a common belief in Saudi society that most female nurses or doctors are unmarried spinsters. Even I believed this until I interviewed a number of Saudi female nurses and surprisingly found that most of them are either married or engaged.

This may indicate that Saudi society's view of female nurses and doctors has positively changed and that some Saudi men accept that their daughters, sisters, or wives work as nurses or doctors in hospitals. This may be due to the saturation of the women's educational sector and the high rates of unemployment amongst female graduates in the educational disciplines

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