Twitter and Saudi Women: the Voice of the Voiceless
Shekhah Al Dosary

Recently Saudi Arabia has taken many progressive steps to improve the situation of women’s rights in the country, a subject which has often been described as restrictive. Recently, sport education was allowed in girls’ private schools, and women were allowed to bike in public. But one of the major progressive steps was last February, when King Abdullah appointed 30 Saudi women for the first time ever to work at the Shoura Council, the formal advisory body of the country. Additionally, he has declared that women will be able to vote and run in the 2015 municipal elections.

All these changes came as an answer to some of the demands for more civil rights from Saudi women. For the first time, these demands have found a place where all women can participate and express what they want. That place is Twitter. Saudis in general and women in particular have found a tool to express their opinion and use it actively to make a change.

According to Neif Al-Wael, a Saudi journalist and Media Professor at King Saud University in Riyadh, women use Twitter in their favor, breaking many barriers they used to have in the past that silenced them.

“Women now understand the importance of their voice in society; they start to introduce themselves as partners in success and development in the country. And Twitter is one of the best tools for that,” he added.

Now when any news about a Saudi woman is announced, or a regulation has been proposed or before it’s passed, then the women immediately go to Twitter to find the reaction or measure the public opinion.

Twitter is the women’s tool to show they are there and their opinion matters. They use it as platform to express what they think of the government’s regulations regarding all social issues in the country.

Maha Al-Wabel, a Saudi writer and media expert, believes that woman’s voice is now considered on a larger scale by the officials, “We have a wider participation in society and shaping the direction of the policy makers. Women start to address subjects that not only relate to them, but to society in general, especially in supporting the kingdom’s reform strategy.”

“Women’s voices can be heard now on a larger scale, unlike in the past. Today Twitter is the voice of Saudi women,” added Al-Wabel.

Al-Wabel is one of many Saudi women who believe that Twitter is the “Voice of Saudi Women” now. In an online survey I conducted between March and April 2013 with 202 participants, of which 175 were Saudi women, the majority confirmed that as well. 123 out of 172 participants agreed that Twitter is an activism tool in Saudi Arabia, while only eight didn’t agree, and 32 were neutral.

The survey was designed to study Saudi women’s usage experience on Twitter and how they view it when it comes to social activism in society.

The Activism Tool
Saudi women don’t see Twitter now as just a social media application, but rather an activism tool to make a positive change in society, social reform, and issues related to Saudi women. Within the survey, 100 participants see Twitter as their own tool to make a positive social change in Saudi Arabia, while only 23 disagreed and 46 were undecided.

In addition, many of them see women’s issues as a secondary issue now. 77 Saudi women believed that the government agencies are the ones who should change the situation of women, “I believe every person, whether a man or a woman, should have a circle where he could influence. A person should use Twitter effectively. Also our goal of using Twitter should be to attract attention. We should use Twitter to seriously make our voices heard and make a positive change,” said Zainab Jumaah, a graduate student in pharmacy.

109 women believed that Twitter has helped highlighting their situation, and only 24 women disagreed.

Twitter has changed how women are viewing themselves, and how they evaluate their presences in the reform strategy. For the first time, women are expressing their opinion in their real names without hiding behind nicknames or fake identities.

“Their opinion and with her real name, which is an attitude that we lacked in the past. In the e-forum we used nicknames and fake names, but in Twitter we use our real names and express our opinion freely,” said Nouf Al-Buraiki, a 25-year-old MA student majoring in optometry.

**The Pioneer Users**

Saudi women were the pioneers in using this application effectively since it has been introduced to the Saudi market. The result of the survey showed that Twitter is used by almost all women’s groups regardless of their age, education, occupation or background. However, the main users as showed by the survey are educated Saudi women, who are between 20-40 years old. Most of the survey takers were highly educated women with bachelor’s degree or higher.

When Saudi women were asked about how much of Twitter they use, 32% said they used all features available, 24% tweet, 27% only retweet, 7% use “favorite,” and 11% don’t use any features at all.

Although students make up half of Saudi women using Twitter, those working in the public sector come next, comprising 20% of users with 32% working in education. Only 10% were women working in the private sector.

Saudi women used Twitter as a communication tool. However, most of the Saudi women who used Twitter, vary in their level of usage: 80% of participants said they log on to their account more than once a day. Some women spend between 4 and 5 hours on Twitter daily.

61% of Saudi women said that Twitter is their favorite social media application, followed by Facebook at 31%. 5% choose other social media applications such as Instagram, Blackberry Messenger, Whatsapp and Skype; 3% said they have no preference.

**Topic of interest and Women’s Issues on Twitter**
When it comes to Saudi women’s favorite topics on Twitter, the latest news come first. Secondly comes education. Religious matters have their share of attention on Twitter discussions by Saudi women. Then comes the entertainment news. Only 43 participants are interested in celebrities’ news.

Saudi women’s issues and women’s rights in the kingdom are the most controversial issues. Women’s views toward any change are still a mixture of hope, excitement and disappointment.

This combination of feelings is reflected on Twitter. Women’s issues and hashtags are still under consideration by many Saudi women, despite the demand by women activists. In an interview for Christian Science Monitor, Saudi Princess Ameerah Al-Taweel, a leader in social activism and women empowerment, said: “It’s time for Saudi women to beat conservative clerics at their own game by using Twitter and blogging.”

Saudi women have a varied response to these calls. There is still a fine line between women supporting and rejecting changes in women’s rights in Saudi Arabia.

The survey showed 49 women are participating in Twitter pages and accounts about Saudi women’s rights and related matters, while 54 don’t participate and 70 are undecided.

Saudi women participants are still reluctant toward change on major women’s issues. This hesitance is based on a long history of ignoring their major demands in society. One of the best examples is the issue of banning Saudi women from driving cars.

Al-Buriki ,MA student majoring in optometry said, “The most important thing that they need to tweet about, since women are using Twitter, is driving, because unfortunately Saudi women are the only women in the world who don’t drive. So now they are trying to change that, but the problem is that society refuses to change this, so no matter how much women want to change something, they can’t because society refuses to change. The society in general, I can’t specify men - the society as a whole, its government, its society, and some women, they refuse to drive.”

Women driving, women’s rights of equal opportunity in the society, custody matters, change in civil laws toward women, and removing the guardianship rules are among the top demands for women that haven’t been met yet.

**Restrictions Imposed on Saudi Women**

This disappointment among women is just one of many reasons that made them decide to invest their voices on enhancing other situations and solving bigger issues. However, it is not the only reason. Saudi women are still facing many uphill battles.

Many women choose to be passive users. Their experience on Twitter is nothing more than following and reading what other people are tweeting, whereas other women are forced to be passive users due to restrictions imposed on them.

In the survey, 85 participants said they felt restricted on expressing their opinion on Twitter, in comparison to 50 participants that said they don’t feel any sort of restriction.
Most of these restrictions are based on family values that still take honor in how their women are behaving. 93 of the participants said they have it. There is still a fear among Saudi women of being misunderstood or being accused of rejecting family values, especially when interacting with men.

Additionally, 98 women say that their Twitter restriction is based on cultural values. These cultural restrictions are one of the reasons why many Saudi women won’t show their real picture, as many of them cover their faces. In a survey 35 participants said they show their picture, in comparison to 93 who said that they don’t.

Until now, many Saudi women were afraid to show their real picture or write what they believe in the culture, or discussing love or anything that may differ from their family views, or the restricted cultural values that still frown on these practices.

“When I first showed my picture, I had people calling me and advising me to take it off as I’m dishonoring the family. Some women even informed me that they will unfollow me, as I’m doing something against the culture,” said Al-Wabel, a 40-year-old writer.

However this is not the only restriction. Religious values have played a vital role in hindering women from expressing their opinion. 117 women agreed that their Twitter restriction is based on religious values, in comparison with only 33 who don’t.

Extreme Islamic views used to be practiced in Saudi Arabia that said that a woman’s voice is forbidden, and that women should be modest, stay at home, and should show herself only to her relatives. Some Saudi families have been very strict on imposing these religious family values on their women; some women even imposed them on themselves.

Although many Saudi women believe in Twitter as a place to express their opinions, many still have their reservation and many still use self-censorship.

“I can express my opinion freely, but not 100% free, because there is censorship from the government, also you don’t want to cross lines. If you do everyone know that you will suffer legal consequences. ” said Shoroq Mohammed, a 22-year-old who uses her first name in her Twitter account and doesn’t show her picture.

**Positive Changes**

Twitter has changed how Saudi men view women and has formed a new relationship between them that is based on respect and admiration of their success. This transformation has affected Saudi women’s situation in society positively.

Women’s interaction with men at Twitter is phenomenal. Now it’s based on respect and mutual interest toward the best of the country. Men have also changed their traditional views on women.

As explained by Najah Al-Hussain, a 50-year-old social service worker, “The best thing about Twitter is it allows Saudi women to interact with men, in the past she was too afraid. And the culture of the country blames her if she talks with a guy or befriends a man, even if she talks with a guy on the street. But now that has changed. This fear has disappeared, and it has become very normal.”
“Twitter made us bolder to talk with all members of society, whether man or woman, official or non-official. Now on Twitter I can even reach the male officials,” she added.

Media expert Al-Wael believed the reason for this change is that women start to see the respect men have for them now: “Saudi men now have more respect for women, and are ready to listen to what they have to say. They now see women as their partners in making progressive change.”

Women are seizing the opportunity of having a free space for all, where men don’t govern the platform and where they have equal opportunity to present their opinion. Their opinions are not eliminated by the government as in the past, or as what the traditional media used to do.

“In the 80s, the Saudi women tool for communicating was the media, and unfortunately our media is controlled by the government. So the Saudi woman could not make her voice heard, now she has the freedom or the decision to make it heard,” said Nouf Al-Buraiki.

“There is no control on Twitter. They (the government) can’t impose the control. For example now while I’m in the US I can tweet about something that represents me in Saudi Arabia. They don’t have the ability to control me,” she added.

**Saudi women representation debate!**

Twitter is flooded with Saudi women demanding more rights. Although most of them are journalists, princesses and social workers, there are a great number of ordinary users who just want a positive change. However, Saudi women are still questioning if these women who represent them are the ones who would actually make the change. Many Saudi women believe that women activists demanding Saudi women’s rights are doing it for a personal agenda without caring about the general good of the majority.

In a survey, only 31 out 202 participants agreed that these women represent them. Women issues represented in Twitter were also another controversial topic for some Saudi women. Many women believe these issues are not what they really want.

“Most of the Saudi women there are women who have prominent positions in society. For example, ‘A Princess that’s talking about women’s issues’ is just making a show, and not solving any problems. They are trying to sharpen and perfect their image in front of the government and the international media. It is nothing more than just a show. They aren’t representative of Saudi women at large,” said Al-Buraiki

Some women question the nationality of these women and their belonging to Saudi society. “Some of the media ladies (who represent Saudi women) weren’t born in Saudi Arabia. Most of their tweets that I saw represent their personality more than our issues. Some of them like to be in the spotlight and to show off, they want to gather the most followers. Although we shouldn’t judge their intention, it is very obvious. Honestly, for me as a Saudi citizen, they don’t represent me,” said Jumah, a graduate student.

**The voice of the voiceless**

What makes Saudi women’s experience in Twitter so unique is that it has allowed many Saudi women to cross social, traditional, and religious boundaries that typically eliminate the voice of women in society.
Twitter was introduced in an age where Saudi society was ready to change, and is working on reforming society.

These changes are based on the respectful attitude of Saudi men toward women now, in contrast to the past when men used to view women as a submissive group who couldn’t have leading roles or valuable opinions in society.

Yet there are many women don’t believe in Twitter as a tool to make any change, or to discuss the real issues that women are facing.

Nourah Al-Turkey, a PhD student in education, said, “I don’t think it gives her a voice, because she may write on Twitter, but no one has given her a right to change anything in Saudi society. She just writes words for nothing. For example, the issue of women driving, everyone talked about it, but nothing has happened till now.”

Nourah, among others, see Twitter as a place to only express opinions without implementing any real-life change. Additionally, many Saudi women are concerned that women who need help and need an instant change in their situation are not represented on Twitter.

Reem Al-Ghamdi, a university student in the US, said, “The majority of people who use Twitter are an educated social class in which does not experience suffering. They just log on to kill some time. But the ones who truly suffer, the groups below the middle class and the poor, are the ones who need to make their suffering heard.”

“They are the ones who cannot make their voices heard. They may not even be educated. This is the problem,” she added.

Twitter usage is still debatable among Saudis. However, Twitter has proven to be a useful source of information on raising awareness among policymakers, Saudis in general and Saudi women activists in particular. Twitter has highlighted many issues in Saudi society, among them women’s issues.

Nouf said, “Twitter gives a voice to Saudi society as a whole. It doesn’t decide if this voice is for a man or a woman, this is not the case. Society has been educated about giving its opinion. It helps the whole society. It gave women as a whole the chance to express opinions without distinguishing between a man and woman.”

The social scene in Saudi Arabia is changing. Saudi women are now using social media as an empowerment tool to gain more rights, to participate in the decision making process and to be an equal partner in society. Twitter is just one tool that reflects this determination.

Women along with men now are working toward more reform in Saudi society, thanks to Twitter. Twitter has become a democratic place where women and men from both parties in Saudi Arabia (liberal and conservative) are expressing their thoughts and most importantly are voicing women’s issues, and demanding more rights and reforms in Saudi Arabia.

Neif Al-Wael said, “Twitter is our meeting table, discussing table that everyone has a right to have an opinion. For the first time in our history we can gather both sexes and opposition parties in one place.”
“Officials find it as the best tool to communicate with people. The leaders of the country are active on Twitter now. They believe in the importance of this application. The crown prince, Prince Alwaleed, and other ministers are there now, and many ministers have fixed many issues based on what is in Twitter,” explained Al-Wael.

“That is our Twitter.” He added.

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