The Lingerie Revolution

But women decided they'd had enough. In 2012, Saudi Arabia began enforcing a law that allows only females to work in lingerie stores. Gradually, women were also granted the right to sell abayas, make-up, handbags and shoes. Children's toys. Clothes. Slowly but surely, men were banished from these realms.

Female participation in the workforce, however, brought with it a host of new problems. How could women get to work, when they're not allowed to drive? Who was going to look after their children? What happens if they're expecting? More laws have subsequently been passed, from a right to ten-weeks of paid parental leave, to a right to work part-time and a right to childcare support. A revolution started by lingerie. Only in Saudi Arabia.

Society has undergone dramatic change in the last ten years, ever since the late King Abdullah succeeded to the throne in 2005. The change has been especially dramatic since 2011. The main reason for the transformation is that a growing number of women are now working, and not just as civil servants, teachers and doctors. They're increasingly better-educated and financially independent and above all, they're a far more visible presence. They're leaving the isolation of their homes and are free to travel around inside the country, at least, to stay in hotels, and to set up companies. There are now even women's shelters in Saudi Arabia and discussions of violence against women are no longer the taboo they used to be. The way women are perceived has changed - as has the way they perceive themselves.

"I used to be afraid all the time, I avoided speaking to strangers," says Alamri. "But then I started to open up and meet people, and to enjoy life." Her husband, however, began to stop by the store where she worked. He spied on her and told her she wasn't allowed to speak to strange men. At home, he shouted at her. She began to ask herself why she needed him. She was earning money, after all. Not a lot, but enough to support herself. After two years, she filed for divorce.

Today Alamri is store manager. But she still has unfulfilled ambitions. She went to night school to gain a degree in sociology. She'll be writing her final exams in a few weeks' time. She's considering applying for a better-paid job. She'd like to send her daughter to a private school, and reels off a list of countries she'd like to visit: India, Malaysia, the US. She just returned from her first trip abroad --- to Dubai. She says she's never been so happy.

Saudi Arabia's raison d'état

These days, women can check travelers' passports at the airport, work as lawyers filing complaints in court, sit on executive boards and enter the diplomatic corps. Female entrepreneurs are running successful catering services, developing apps and designing abayas they then sell via Instagram. For the last two years, 30 of the 150 members of the Consultative Assembly of Saudi Arabia, the Shura Council, have been women handpicked by the former King. At the end of the year, women will be able to vote for their local council for the first time and also to run as candidates.

Of course, there is another way of looking at this. The Shura Council is merely an impotent pseudo-parliament. Women still cannot be judges or ambassadors. Only 15 percent of women are employed. Saudi Arabia is home to more highly-qualified housewives than anywhere else in the world. They are still infantilized by law, legally controlled by male guardians. They have to wear abayas; arranged marriages remain the norm and the punishment for adultery can be the death sentence. Women in rural areas, meanwhile, can still only dream of the freedoms now enjoyed by women in cities.

Segregation of the sexes is still Saudi Arabia's raison d'état, keenly monitored by the national vice squad. Their mission is to prevent ikhtilat and khalwa. Ikhtilat is a term used to describe the free mixing between men and women, while khalwa is a more serious offense -- namely, when a woman is with a man alone, be it in a room or car. Young girls are raised to respect these dictates. Even friends will rarely have met one another's wives. Up to four wives are allowed.

These principles form the mainstay of this fundamentalist state. Nevertheless, much progress has been made, even if Saudi Arabia is still decades behind much of the rest of the world. The change is only apparent if you look very closely, past the black veils that so often deflect the world's gazes from this country.

Seeing Past the Veils

You have to look past many veils to see Ebtisam Almutlaqd, who wears an abaya, niqab and headscarf. All black. Only her hands are visible, white and delicate, and her dark eyes. 30-year-old Almutlaqd makes sculptures out of wire. One, of a figure that looks like it's straining forward, is called "Be free."

"Let's turn our difficulties into challenges and our obstacles into motivation," it says on her website. So is her art a plea for the liberation of the confined oppressed women of Saudi Arabia?

Almutlaqd smiles. It's a smile that can actually be seen now, because she's in the Ladies Kingdom, a women-only floor of the Kingdom Center shopping mall in Riyadh, and has thus taken off her veil and headscarf. "The West is always trying to liberate us, but we don't feel as though we aren't free, we feel appreciated in our society, thank God," says Almutlaqd. She hopes her art expresses the idea that Saudi Arabian women can achieve anything they want.

Anything? What about the segregation of the sexes? The fact that women require male guardians? She shrugs off all these objections. "I am proud to be a Saudi-Arabian woman," says Almutlaqd, who doesn't see any contradiction between tradition and contemporary art. She studied art in Riyadh, learning that art is predicated on independent thinking -- in a country that rejects anything that distracts from religion. The first galleries only recently opened in Riyadh. But Almutlaqd, a devout Muslim, now sells her work to wealthy Saudi princes.

Other female artists, like 24-year-old Reema AlJawiny, don't wear black abayas. She's dressed in a woolen coat and sweatpants. She wears her hair short and has a pierced eyebrow. She draws pictures of half-naked women and posts them on Instagram. When she's not drawing or training for her next marathon, she also teaches gym classes. She's taken part in marathons in Belgium and Dubai. But if she wants to run in Riyadh, she has to go to the secluded diplomatic quarter, where the embassies are and only foreigners live. To her, running in public in a country that bans girls in state schools from taking part in gym class, is a form of protest.

Two women who both live in Riyadh, who could not be more different. But in their own separate ways, both are trying to overcome the barriers their country has placed before them. Both are young women who belong to a younger generation yearning for more space for themselves, but what they actually mean is more freedom.

The Liberating Impact of Social Media

It's a tall order. In Saudi Arabia, emancipation is not personal but political. Women are caught in the crossfire of a battle between conservatives and modernizers that is raging across the Islamic world, and

especially in Saudi Arabia. What is unfolding there is nothing less than a social experiment: what happens when an archconservative country undergoes an accelerated process of modernization?

Statistically speaking, two key trends can be observed: Firstly, three out of four Saudi Arabians are under thirty. Secondly, nowhere in the world do these young people spend more time on YouTube than in Saudi Arabia; nowhere in the world does Twitter have more active users in proportion to the population; nowhere else in the world is a Smartphone as liberating and catalytic as it is here.

Young people, after all, have little else to do. Cinema is banned. The shows broadcast on local television are either religious or stultifingly boring. In contrast, YouTube is a legal gray area, out of reach of the censors and therefore a font of entertainment in a desert of distractions. This is largely, but not only, the doing of Kaswara al-Khatib, who in 2010 co-founded the YouTube channel UTurn. It's been providing millions of Saudi Arabians with comedy, news and entertainment shows ever since.

46-year-old Khatib works in an office close to the airport in Jeddah. He wears a traditional long, white thawb and horn-rimmed glasses, the international uniform of the creative classes. There's no smoking or drinking in the videos shown on UTurn, no drugs, no bare skin. But there are female presenters and lots of music. UTurn is constantly pushing the envelope, bringing content that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago into the mainstream.

What did young Saudi Arabians do before the Internet age? "Good god," says Khatib and laughs. "Things were terrible when I was young."

He and his friends would race cars and throw scrunched-up pieces of paper with their telephone numbers on them at girls -- despite the fact they could only see their eyes. "Then we'd dash home and wait by the phone." When one of these girls actually called and they arranged to meet in a supermarket. When the girls showed up, albeit with a chaperone, the boys were thrilled. "But actually talking to one another was out of the question." He raises his eyebrows. "I think society has grown up since then."

Contradictions and Crumbling Walls

Many couples meet at work. They talk on the phone, send each other pictures via Facebook and Snapchat. They're no longer willing to submit to arranged marriages. A growing number of women don't

want to marry a man who's also their guardian at all. According to official figures, 45 percent of women over 30 are single and 40 percent of marriages end in divorce.

Marriage is one of the foundations of Saudi society, and one that will erode if women no longer comply with the rules. The walls between the sexes, defended by the devout for decades, are slowly being torn down. The more women work, the more obvious the contradictions and the harder it becomes to maintain segregation.

Why are there separate entrances for men and women in offices, for example, when they can be seated next to one another in planes? Why are women allowed to be driven by a foreigner but not by their own cousin? Why can sales clerks talk to customers but aren't allowed to meet their future husbands before they've got engaged? First and foremost, why does the state spend so much money educating women when there are no jobs for them?

A conference center at the Hilton in Jeddah, on the western coast, in late April. Golden frescoes grace the walls; heavy chandeliers hang from the ceiling. Beneath them are crowds of women, thronging past stands from Ikea, Ernst & Young and a Saudi branch of the bank HSBC. Some of them are wearing fancy silk abayas, others are clad more conservatively in black, but they all have their resumés in their purses and they're all here to find a job.

All of that is totally normal. A job exchange that is just for women, however, isn't self-evident in Saudi Arabia -- despite the fact that many women don't know how they're supposed to find a job, and many employers, most of them men, don't know how they're supposed to find women. Or that women like Eman Alzahrani -- an unmarried 32-year-old who just returned from Montreal with a masters in computer science in her pocket - exist at all. She is a small, resolute woman who wears her abaya so that her checkered blouse and patent-leather shoes are visible beneath it. She is in the process of discovering that her country is not yet like her -- that although it has paid for her expensive education, it still has no use for her computer knowledge.

An Upside-Down World

Over 150,000 Saudi Arabians are currently studying abroad, half of them at American universities. After Chinese, Indians and South Koreans, they are the largest foreign contingent. One third of the Saudi students abroad are women, and now they are returning to their homeland. But unlike earlier

generations, they aren't satisfied with teaching in schools or running philanthropic projects. They want to develop computer programs, lead companies or build houses.

Alzahrani walks up to the company booths, fills out application questionnaires on iPads and passes along her resume. But she hears the same thing everywhere: female IT experts aren't needed, but could she imagine working in accounting?

It is a seemingly upside-down world: Women looking for jobs as shop clerks are overwhelmed with job offers. But it's extremely difficult for well-educated women -- one third of all female university graduates are unemployed, and 60 percent of all the graduates are women.

After one hour, Alzahrani gives up and drops into an armchair. "The government supports that we women are working," she says angrily. "But our society is still very conservative."

She could take the easy way out and go to America -- she has a US passport. But she wants to create change in her country, she doesn't want to take the simple path. She has never taken that path: She has four brothers, her father is an officer and her mother is a homemaker. She applied for the international scholarship in secret, and didn't tell her parents until she had gotten her spot.

Before going to Canada, she worked in the administration of a military hospital. She enjoyed it -- being the only woman among men, she suddenly had freedoms she hadn't imagined. The army job is now her plan B. She could imagine going back there for work. In any case, she is determined: first a job, then marriage. She doesn't want to deviate from her plan, because she is afraid that she will end up a homemaker, like so many women before her.

A Desire for Change

Khalid Alkhudair organized this job fair for women like Eman Alzahrani -- women who are highly qualified, modern and full of energy. You can still see his pride and amazement when he sees all the young female graduates. This isn't the first job fair he has organized, but demand is undiminished.

Alkhudair is a small 31-year-old, dressed in a thawb and a red-white checkered ghutrah, the traditional headcovering. But his outward appearance is deceptive. Alkhudair studied in the United States; he is married to a woman who, of course, works. His office is decorated like a start-up, with white leather sofas and mottos on the walls.

When he finished his university education, he spent some time being unemployed before getting a job at KPMG. "And many women, who were much smarter than me, had a much harder time," he says. He thought that women should be helped, an idea that took years to come to fruition. Driven by business acumen and the desire for change, Alkhudair founded the women's recruitment company Glowork in 2011. Only about 70,000 Saudi Arabian women worked at that point -- 95 percent them as civil servants.

Alkhudair went to Microsoft and Cisco in Riyadh, where people were excited about his idea. Only the Saudi Arabian company-heads were resistant, because they claimed women weren't qualified. They had never employed women before. Above all else they claimed that women are too expensive, because when you hire a woman, you need to create a separate office. Separate toilets. Separate break rooms. Separate entrances.

It might have remained that way, had there not been a historical accident: the Arab Spring in early 2011. After the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain, the government became afraid of its own young people. And in order to appease them, they spent money: $550 per month for every unemployed person. By December 2012, 2.2 million Saudi Arabians had claimed the benefit, 1.6 million of whom were female. Suddenly they had a face. And a price tag: the support cost a total of $10 billion per year.

What would happen if the government didn't merely pay off the unemployed, but invested in them through training, through placement, by helping women find jobs? That's what Alkhudair thought, and he suggested exactly that. Former Employment Minister Adel Fakeih agreed. Now Glowork has 63 employees. They've found jobs for over 10,000 women, as workers in a lightbulb factory, and as baristas in cafes, but also as human resources officers and accountants. The number of women with jobs has increased approximately eightfold since 2011.

When Women Work…

Alkhudair strolls through the halls of the job fair, holding a paper cup with coffee in his hand. He heads towards a married couple that founded a carwash startup. The idea is that you can order your carwash

using an app. Of course, Alkhudair says, it was the woman's idea, and she was the driving force behind the project. It's actually always that way, he claims. "The women," he says with a smile, "will change this country more than anyone else."

He is an optimist who constantly believes things are changing for the better. He just launched Glofit, a gym for women. He is now thinking about launching Glocar, a taxi company for women. "In two years, women will be working everywhere in the malls," he says. "The conservatives are slowly giving up their resistance, and it is becoming more and more accepted that women are working." He hopes that the ties between tradition and religion loosen, this glue that has held together the kingdom since its founding.

The more women work, the less the stringent rules are being enforced. Companies rarely still build separate entrances: Many women don't wear headscarves in the workplace and take taxis to work, which until recently was taboo.

But it isn't as if there is no resistance. In late 2011, the country's highest-ranking legal scholar, Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al al-Sheikh, declared it a "crime" for women to sell underwear. He said he wished that Adel Fakeih, employment minister at the time, would die of cancer. When Alkhudair negotiated the first positions for female cashiers at a supermarket in Riyadh, there was an outcry -- the women were then let go. And just recently, a scholar warned that female telemarketers could seduce men through their "flirtatious tone of voice."

Again and again, the religious police threatens to arrest saleswomen, and claims that ikhtilat and khalwa are on the rise. But the late King Abdullah pushed through the reforms despite resistance. He also founded the largest women's university in the world, where approximately 40,000 students are registered.

Overstepping Boundaries

But what happens when, one day, the new king suddenly tires of all of this freedom introduced by his predecessor? When Salman shuffled his cabinet in late April, he fired the only woman, the deputy minister of education, who had occupied the position since 2009. This is hardly a coincidence -- because no position was more symbolic. So far this year, 100 people have been executed. And critical voices have become even quieter.

"But the change is there, it can no longer be reversed. Even if it doesn't progress any further, we have at least accomplished a lot," says Rajaa Alsanea. She also claims that she is almost sad not to have been born a few years later. "The young women have a much easier time today that I did back then," she says, even though she is only 33 years old. She studied dentistry, which was a pragmatic choice. Other courses she might have preferred would have been hard for her to get on to as a woman. Now she works in a state clinic. "But if I had to decide today, I would become a lawyer or a journalist."

She has never been afraid of overstepping boundaries. Ten years ago, "The Girls from Riyadh" was published, and became the bestselling book in Saudi Arabia after the Koran. The novel was scandalous, because the young Saudi Arabian women it described drank champagne and drove cars, and because Alsanea made it clear that it hewed closely to reality. It painted a picture of a pretty wild, modern generation -- wedged in by the old one. And still, she says, the young women of today are different: even more independent, open, less assimilated.

Back then, her novel was banned, but it was smuggled into the country and sold for up to $500. After one year, the censors lifted the ban, because they couldn't prevent it from spreading. And Alsanea claims that's what always happens: The hardliners try to clamp down on new things, but when they notice that they can't be stopped, they allow it. Change, in Saudi Arabia that means carefully testing the outer limits of the conservatives' resistance, a constant shifting of the grey zones between reality, law and tradition.

But the reforms need to come from inside -- the louder the women ask for their rights, the more the government locks up. It is more effective, Alsanea says, to talk about economic necessities rather than about rights.

The Driving Ban

The government's support of women has taken off since the level of prosperity in the formerly richest Gulf State began to sink. These days, government policy officially aids women -- the newspapers print glowing reports almost daily, and celebrate the country's first female editor in chief, first female pilot, and the first female Saudi Arabian on Mount Everest.

However, almost half the respondents to a study by the Khadijah Bint Khuwaylid Center in Jeddah still believe that women don't belong at the supermarket checkout, in factories or in the political world. At the same time, according to the same study, 80 percent of men and 90 percent of women believe it is economically advantageous for women to be working.

But one thing is still missing: women still are not allowed to drive a car.

"You cannot imagine how difficult it is for us to raise our voices," says an activist sitting in a Riyadh hotel cafe. She would like to stay anonymous, but speaks so loudly that the three men sitting at the neighboring table look over. "Whoever criticizes our society, religion or the government, quickly ends up in prison, their whole family can be punished," she says, and gesticulates so wildly that the veil on her head slides further and further back.

She has been arrested several times, for sitting behind the wheel of a car and also for filming other women doing the same thing. It wasn't the first protest of its kind. Since 1990, women have, again and again, driven cars in order to protest against the ban.

But even so, Saudi Arabia is still the only country in the world in which women are not allowed to drive cars. As with so many other things here, the ban has never officially been explained -- it is simply as it is. Sometimes a theologist states an absurd reason supposedly justifying the ban. One of them claimed that driving damages women's ovaries. But it's actually about limiting women's freedom of movement.

Shortly after taking office, then-King Abdullah said that there would come a day when women would be allowed to drive. Many people thought it wouldn't take much longer for the ban to be rescinded. But it is still there, and given the absence of public transportation, it has become an obstacle for the economy. This, ultimately, also offers a chance to have it abolished.

"The government can no longer keep this absurd ban in place," says the activist. "There are now many women who leave the house in order to study or to work." But they are not allowed to be alone in a car with any man who is not their husband, father, brother or son. Guest workers are an exception, one of the many illogical but pragmatic gaps in the system.

The activist also has a foreign driver, which she says is expensive and complicated. She sighs, saying that it is important to select the driver carefully. After all she often spends more time with him than with her husband. "We live with a male stranger in our house -- simply so that women don't drive themselves!"

Utopian Requests

One oft-repeated reason for the ban: Saudi Arabian society is conservative, the people want it that way. The activist snorts angrily, "Who says that? Who knows what the people are really thinking? Before politics were always conducted by the rulers, and the people went to the mosque. But the people I interact with are different." The young generation, which is well educated and connected, have figured out that the constant debates about whether it is suitable for women to drive a car, or to show their face, are useful for the royals because they distract from political issues.

So far, the newfound freedom for women has not yet led to a growth in participation, perhaps because their emancipation is meant to replace exactly that -- by creating social freedoms that do not endanger the regime. The question is whether the change can be contained, and whether self-confident men and women will turn into citizens who demand their rights.

But political freedom is still far away in Saudi Arabia. This increases the likelihood that the country will one day be forced to undergo drastic reforms -- or be torn apart by a conflict between the young, nimble generation and its ossified system.

Many enlightened young Saudi Arabians, the activist says, are less religious than the older ones, and also more interested in politics. What her country needs, she claims, is a constitutional monarchy, a constitution, a real parliament. She knows how utopian these kinds of requests are. And how dangerous. But she continues talking, leans forward, her eyes glowing.

She and her friends, she says, hope for a largely secular union in the model of Europe or the United States. "United States of Arabia," she whispers, "wouldn't that be wonderful?" She laughs a bit self-consciously. She has allowed herself to be seduced into dreaming, in the bright middle of the day, in the center of Riyadh.