

# EXERCISING AGENCY: WOMEN, SPACE AND PLACE IN SAUDI ARABIA

PHOEBE O'HARA<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on verbal interviews with twelve young Saudi women, Erving Goffman's conception of the "front and backstage," and Saba Mahmood's articulation of agency, this paper shows that in a changing authoritarian state, women must navigate spaces that are either controlled by the family or the state and that the behavior of young Saudi women differs depending on the space that they are in. I argue that even amidst changing state policies aimed at altering female behavior in public spaces, familial structures remain the key determinant of female behavior in Saudi Arabia. Despite the recent elimination of sex segregation from public spaces, certain new public behaviors are redefining traditional Saudi patriarchal systems of control within the context of these newly organized sites. Collectively, these arguments demonstrate that the experiences of Saudi women change from one space to another and cannot be reduced to a singular narrative or experience.

## INTRODUCTION

The lives of young Saudi women are often exploited by the media to substantiate analyses of a grand geopolitical event or to provide an overview about the struggles of women in the Middle East. Headlines like "Saudi Teen Granted Asylum in Canada Makes the Most of Her New Life—Eating BACON for Breakfast and Grabbing a Starbucks Coffee with Her Legs Exposed" or "Women in Saudi Arabia; Unshackling Themselves" rarely

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<sup>1</sup> Phoebe O'Hara is a recent graduate from Duke University who lives in London. Her piece is part of a larger research project that she completed for her thesis in International Comparative Studies, for which she gained the prize "Most Distinguished Thesis." Her academic focus is on the Middle East, and she is about to begin an internship with the United Nations Development Programme, working on their projects in Palestine.

contextualize the everyday lives of the women on whom they are commenting.<sup>2</sup> Instead, these stories objectify Saudi women by speaking for them rather than allowing them to exercise their own agency and verbalize their own experiences. This study seeks to contextualize these headlines by giving a voice to young Saudi women through primary research in the form of interviews. These conversations provide an insight into the myriad ways in which women are experiencing contemporary Saudi Arabia and show their everyday experience to be far more complex than a simple headline is able to capture. My research draws on twelve interviews with young Saudi women and the theories of Erving Goffman and Saba Mahmood to de-sensationalize Saudi society and explore it not as a nation that ought to be evaluated by its progression from “tradition” to “modernity,” but rather one in which multi-faceted and often contradictory forces interact to impact the lives of Saudi women in the context of a rapidly transforming state. At the heart of this dynamic is a constant tension between the power structures of the state and the family.

This paper focuses on the experiences of young Saudi women as they move between different physical spaces. I draw on a broader research project that analyzes three sites: the family home, the restaurant, and the Compound. My focus here will be on a Compound called Dhahran, a gated community owned by the Saudi based company Aramco (formerly Arabian-American Oil Company) that offers housing, support services, local clinics, and amenities for company employees and their families.<sup>3</sup> Historically, Compounds have been established by foreign companies for their personnel and have long been dominated by Western social and cultural norms, many of which conflict with those that can be found in Saudi society, particularly those relating to women. I will also draw on research on the home and the restaurant in order to show how women inhabit different spaces in complex ways. I connect Goffman’s idea of performative space and Mahmood’s definition of agency—expanding the latter definition to include the concept of “inhabited norms”—to reveal how rules enforced by family authority

<sup>2</sup> Khaleda Raman, “Saudi Teen Granted Asylum in Canada Makes the Most of Her New Life—Eating Bacon for Breakfast and Grabbing a Starbucks Coffee with Her Legs Exposed,” *Daily Mail*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6597381/Saudi-teen-granted-asylum-Canada-eats-BACON-time-grabbing-Starbucks.html>; Peter Schrank, “Women in Saudi Arabia Unshackling Themselves,” *The Economist*, March 17, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2014/05/17/unshackling-themselves>.

<sup>3</sup> Georg Glaze, “Segregation and Seclusion: The Case of Compounds for Western Expatriates in Saudi Arabia,” *Geo Journal* 66.1 (2006): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-006-9018-z>.

figures create the incredibly insular, static, and impermeable organization of the home.<sup>4</sup> The restaurant, by contrast, is a space in flux, where new dynamics are emerging as a result of the government's decision to relax strict rules that have for years defined how women can behave in public. Though in many cases these changing policies allow women to engage in new behaviors, this paper argues that family-imposed norms still prevail. Even so, the spaces in which women find themselves are a key determinant of their behavior. Regardless of which space women are in, their behavior should be thought of in distinctly active terms and not simply a passive reaction to the social structures of hierarchy and domination that surround them.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

As my goal was to understand how Saudi women lived their lives amidst changing but still restrictive social norms and state policies, I used a snowball method to interview 12 young women who were born and raised in Saudi Arabia. Since I was unable to travel to the country, I conducted my interviews over the phone which I then transcribed. The women's names and information have been altered in this piece in order to protect their identities. All of the women interviewed are between the ages of 19-24 and attend university either in Saudi Arabia or abroad in countries such as the United States, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Cyprus. All the women were able to speak to me in almost fluent English, which made up for my low proficiency in Arabic. This language barrier ultimately left out portions of the female population that did not speak English, as well as members of the non-English-speaking Saudi immigrant population.

While a large portion of the women I interviewed reside in the urban area of Riyadh, others live in more rural areas. Although the women who attend university abroad are away from Saudi Arabia during the semester, they do return home for the holidays and remain connected to friends and family, meaning they were still able to speak to a number of the issues I was looking to investigate. That the women travel and study abroad undoubtedly raises the question of whether they have increased exposure to the rights of women in other countries, particularly in comparison to their fellow Saudi women who

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<sup>4</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 18.

do not have the opportunity to do so. While it is evident that they did have a greater awareness of how their lived experience differed from women abroad, all the women that I interviewed had access to technology and regularly used social media, indicating that they had at least a basic understanding of their lives as Saudi women relative to others around the globe.

This group of women is also part of a mid to high socio-economic stratum; because I was connected to interviewees via friends from Saudi Arabia, my ability to reach out to women of a lower socio-economic stratum was limited. My requests to interview immigrants working in the homes of interviewees were also declined because the workers were concerned that their interviews would place them at risk of identification and extradition from Saudi Arabia. The specific characteristics of this small group mean that they cannot speak for the entirety of women in Saudi Arabia. However, as many of them currently live away from home at university, their return home has stimulated a renewed awareness of their surroundings that has meant they are able to reflect in new and powerful ways on the changing dynamics of Saudi society, which is itself powerful and noteworthy.

This paper begins with a review of the literature that has been central to this study. I will then provide information on the Dhahran Compound in Saudi Arabia, including its history and demographic makeup. This will serve as the background for the paper's research component, which features excerpts from interviews with women who live in the Compound about their experiences navigating its many spaces. This portion will feature the body of my argument, in which I contend that women adhere to separate norms in particular spaces in Saudi Arabia. As such, my argument complicates our understanding of what it is to be a Saudi woman at this moment in time, challenging the notion that women can only exercise agency through subverting norms, rather than adhering to them.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As I conduct and evaluate this research, it is vital that I recognize my own standing as a British-educated, female scholar. I resonate strongly with the following statement made by Amelie Le Renard, a young French female academic who has also conducted extensive research on Saudi women:

I am not Saudi and I do not pretend to speak in the name of Saudi women

or Saudi feminists. Neither do I seek to participate in the Western discourse on women's oppression in Saudi Arabia, which I think does not help the cause, is imperialistic and selects its victims accordingly.<sup>5</sup>

Le Renard refers here to a history of Anglo-European scholarship on Saudi Arabia, and women in the Middle East on the whole, that for the last two centuries has been dominated by Orientalist and colonialist language. Early on in my research, I engaged with material by Middle Eastern feminist critics such as Mahmood and Leila Ahmed, something which made clear to me the importance of constant reflection on my position as a Western researcher, and the need to avoid stereotyping Saudi Arabia and its people. I hope these reflections come through in this piece, and that my analysis of the changing nature of the lives of young Saudi women—through an exploration of space, power dynamics, and the rules and relationships of Saudi society—highlights the flaws in the oversimplified Orientalist analysis of Saudi women that litters the media and certain streams of academia.

Mahmood's definition of agency is also a central component of this piece. In her book *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood presents a post-colonial analysis of human agency beyond simply the realms of resistance, power, or domination, defining it as a "capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination create and enable."<sup>6</sup> This is in stark contrast to the poststructuralist definition of agency, which views it only as a form of resistance.<sup>7</sup> Mahmood also argues that the agency of devout Muslim women should no longer be ignored. She states that their agency is manifested "not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Mahmood argues that women can simultaneously exercise their agency and adhere to expectations enforced by structures of domination; the very adherence to religious prescriptions is a particular form of agency that is consistently neglected by theorists. Mahmood's

<sup>5</sup> Amelie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> See Alison Stone, Serene Khader, and Ann Garry, eds., "Introduction," in *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

work is important to this piece as it provides a framework to recognize that even when some of the women interviewed are “inhabiting norms” they are still being active agents in their own lives.

I also rely on Le Renard’s ethnographic study of young Saudi women in Riyadh. Her 2011 book, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities, of Place, Power and Reform in Saudi Arabia*, is the most recent ethnographic study of young Saudi women in Riyadh. Her methodology and analysis were immensely helpful as I conducted my own research. It is through Le Renard’s work that I found Goffman’s theory of space and other literature in this area that I will be referencing throughout this study. While I agree with many of Le Renard’s conclusions, I consider my research a progression of her work. While her study examines the experiences of Saudi women in relation to gender-segregated spaces, I seek to offer more up-to-date research that recontextualizes—in light of recent Saudi policies that ostensibly “eradicate” gender segregation—how these women relate to space and negotiate rules and expectations. Her book, therefore, serves as a foundation from which to theorize Saudi space and provides important context for how space was designed in the past.

As Le Renard does in her work, I too use Goffman’s theory of performative space in this paper.<sup>9</sup> Goffman thinks of performance from a theatrical point of view, taking into account how individuals both respond to and formulate judgments of themselves and others. I apply Goffman’s ideas on performative behavior to the Saudi context to liken the Compound to a theatrical stage, where a woman’s behavior changes depending on where she is and who is observing her. The belief underpinning this method of analysis is that the smallest, most minute actions in a social setting are representative of larger cultural phenomena that warrant closer examination. In a given broader environment, Goffman defines behavior as occurring either on the “front stage”—behavior that typically occurs in public—or on the “back stage”—that which usually takes place in private alone, or in the home. “Front stage” actors know that they are being watched by a certain audience, meaning that their performance is highly routinized and follows a learned social script that is shaped by cultural norms. The “back stage” inverts this behavior: the actor no longer has to “act,” and can behave in a way that is truer to their own, real, personalities. There is still an audience in “the back stage,” such as the actor’s friends or family,

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<sup>9</sup> See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

but not one that motivates the actor to alter their manner or appearance in reaction to their presence. These definitions are a central role of this study, as I use this theory to deconstruct how the renegotiation of rules in the Compound is causing a reversal, or complication, of the “front” and “back” stages in this group of young Saudi women.

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON COMPOUNDS IN SAUDI ARABIA**

All the international schools were far removed from the country, most of them were in compounds. So if you grow up in a compound, it's not less valid of another Saudi experience, but it's very different.

Laila, October 9th, 2018

A “Compound” is a gated community owned by a Saudi-based company that offers housing, support services, local clinics, and amenities for company employees and their families.<sup>10</sup> It was one of three spaces I analyzed as part of a larger research project, in addition to the family home and the restaurant. The Compound was chosen as a site of focus for two reasons. First, because it can be considered a space that is both private and public: private in that the homes themselves provide privacy for individuals, but also public, as much of the space outside the home is shared for common activities such as dining, watching movies, and exercising. Second, it was a location in which the majority of the young women interviewed had spent extended periods of time. They were able to provide me numerous anecdotes about the Compound and speak at length about how they navigated the spaces within it.

Within this context, I argue that the Compound is space characterized by secular and liberal norms inherited from the foreign companies and workers who established these spaces. The definition of private-public space that I utilize specific to the Compound is by Littlefield and Devereux, who emphasize that the dynamics of these spaces should be thought of in terms of who has access to them. It was “the private sector creating access to space that was not accessible to begin with” which led to the interactions we see unfold

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<sup>10</sup> Glaze, “Segregation and Seclusion,” 5.



in the Compound, whereby only Saudi nationals who worked for these private corporations could have access.<sup>11</sup> They conclude that “[t]he question becomes, therefore, not one of ownership, but access.”<sup>12</sup> This definition is helpful because it differentiates those Saudis who have access to the compound and those who do not purely on the basis of who they work for.

In particular relation to behavior in privatized public space, Matthew Carmona argues that “[u]ltimately, the rights and responsibilities associated with spaces... are far more important than who owns and manages them.”<sup>13</sup> This is vital to consider given both that ownership of this space has been continuously changing since the nationalization of Saudi Aramco in the 1980s and the recent acceleration of “Saudization” by Prince Salman which has granted more control over this space to the state. In essence, though the individuals in charge of the Compound have changed over time, the culture and social norms of the space remain and, as this research shows, continue to impact women in the present day.

The Compound, however, is not uniform. While the space at large is liberal and secular, the individual homes within it hold their own private set of practices and norms of behavior enforced by the authority figures of the family. The differences in the rules that govern the home compared to the Compound at large create a clear division between the two spaces. An inherent tension has been created by placing the home—which has itself not undergone any fundamental transformation—into a more liberalized public space. The Compound, then, can be thought of as a site where the static, insular home is placed into a more fluid, open environment. This means that, for the Saudi women who live in the Compound, navigating these spaces is not only essential, but is the basis of their everyday lives. By extension, the Compound can also be seen as a metaphor for contemporary Saudi society, where Prince Salman’s liberalized public spaces are in constant tension with the traditional, private spaces that have long determined the traditions that dictate Saudi society. Moving forward, it will be interesting to use the Compound as a blueprint to attempt to understand how young women will negotiate these seemingly contradictory environments.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Devereux and David Littlefield, “A Literature Review on the Privatisation of Public Space,” *UWE Bristol Report*, 2017, <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/31529>, 26.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Carmona, “Re-Theorising Contemporary Public Space: A New Narrative and a New Normative,” *Journal of Urbanism* 8.4 (2015): 400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2014.909518>.



Details about these facilities are not made public by the companies who own them. The most detailed insights into the space can be found on expat blogs, with one describing the space as an “suburban American community.”<sup>14</sup> The Compound into which I gained most insight during the interviews was Dhahran, owned by the Saudi company Aramco (Arab American Oil Company).

The site features American restaurants like Tandoori and Olive Garden, alongside leisure and sport facilities such as a golf course, baseball and soccer pitches, bowling alleys, and riding stables.<sup>15</sup> Homes are built using a tract housing design known as “cookie-cutter housing,” whereby multiple identical homes are divided into small lots along a road, a style typically associated with American suburban housing designs.

In the 1970s, companies such as Aramco created these private gated compounds in Saudi Arabia in order to house foreign employees and their families.<sup>16</sup> Historically, the Saudi government has encouraged the creation of Compounds for foreign workers “in order to limit and control the cultural influences of foreigners in... Saudi society.”<sup>17</sup> The Saudi expropriation of Aramco in 1980 from the Americans was a crucial moment because it led to the Saudis not only taking on a foreign system of oil procurement, but also the company’s Compound network. Timothy Mitchell studies the roots of the oil industry in Saudi Arabia. His argument, as summarized by Kohlbry, is that the creation of these companies by the West “was not some neutral march toward progress but rather bound up with Western domination.”<sup>18</sup> In essence, the foreign oil companies that created these sites did so to establish secure oil reserves for the US and UK through the control of the oil industry in Saudi Arabia. This culminated in the creation of privatized public spaces like the Compound in order to house the British and American workers hired by these

<sup>14</sup> Noor Shahid, “My Life as an Expatriate Girl in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” *Dawn*, 19 September 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1358507>.

<sup>15</sup> Dawn Jobe, “Walking Tour of Dhahran Camp,” *DawnJobe: Adventures in Arabia* (blog), November 8, 2013, <https://dawnjobe.wordpress.com/2013/11/08/120/>; Interview with young Saudi woman (B), phone interview, September 13, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Glaze, “Segregation and Seclusion,” 85.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Kohlbry, “Review Essay: Rule of Experts (2002) and Carbon Democracy (2011),” *Dialectical Anthropology* 37.3-4 (2013): 478.

companies. Mitchell points out that the domination of these companies persisted even after the Saudi nationalization of the oil industry in the 1970s, as “oil its workers on the surface and distributes more of the expertise of production into the offices of managers and engineers.”<sup>19</sup> As these positions had been filled with foreign workers from the US and UK, the only workers skilled enough to do the job for the state after nationalization were these same foreign workers. Mitchell also points out that although nationalization may have left the monarchy as the sole owners of the oil companies, it did not eliminate American influence over the industry at large. In Saudi Arabia, nationalization occurred as a “gradual transfer,” a steady exchange of the industry from the US companies to the state.<sup>20</sup> The conscientious nature of this exchange left many US workers in their positions due to their experience and expertise. Moreover, the closeness of the US and Saudi Arabia lead to Saudi nationalization, leaving many foreign workers and their families remaining in the country over a longer period of time. This explains how both foreign workers and their cultures have historically dominated the housing compounds, as their roles in Saudi Aramco and other oil companies have long been required and insured by the state.

In Saudi Arabia, the term “expatriates” is used only to label those from the West who work for large organizations, while those from the South or South East Asia are dubbed “migrants” by Saudi media or “unskilled workers” and “domestic servants” by the state.<sup>21</sup> The term “expat” is rooted in the British colonial era of the 1960s, canonized by American business circles in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when designating employees abroad to represent a multinational firm.<sup>22</sup> While there are expatriates in Saudi Arabia from a wide array of countries, citizens from the US, the UK, Germany, and France have historically constituted the core group of expatriates in Saudi Arabia since the arrival of foreign oil companies in the late 1930s.<sup>23</sup> Although these spaces have been dominated by foreign expatriates and their families, a small number of

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “Carbon Democracy,” *Economy and Society* 38.3 (2009): 420, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140903020598>.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 169.

<sup>21</sup> Glaze, “Segregation and Seclusion,” 85.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy Green, “Expatriation, Expatriates, and Expats: The American Transformation of a Concept,” *The American Historical Review* 114.2 (2009): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.114.2.307>.

<sup>23</sup> Glaze, “Segregation and Seclusion,” 85.

Saudi nationals employed by the same companies have also resided in these Compounds since their creation. This number remained small due to the high cost of living in these gated communities, which many Saudis could not afford as they did not hold positions that were as financially lucrative as the expatriates’.

This dynamic changed following the enforcement of Saudization, or the “Saudi nationalization scheme.”<sup>24</sup> Enacted in the Fourth Development Plan by the Saudi monarchy from 1985-89, this policy demanded that more companies in industries dominated by foreign workers hire Saudi nationals.<sup>25</sup> Since then, Compounds have been open to the small number of Saudi employees of these companies and their families. As a result, some of the parents of the women I interviewed moved into the Aramco Compound and were forced to contend with the dominant culture of this space that was greatly different from the one outside its gates.

#### RESEARCH ON THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN TODAY IN THE COMPOUND

Two of the women that I interviewed had lived in the Dhahran Compound in the past, and of those who did not, some had attended school in the Compound and/or visited the community to spend time with friends. The two women who had lived in Dhahran described the space for me in great detail, first telling me about the walls and gates used to control access to the space. They also told me how, within the Compound, there is a variety of house sizes: some residents live in single apartments while others, especially those who have larger families, live in semi-detached homes. One of my interviewees, Aesha, told me that the roads resemble boulevards, and explained that the Compound has its own bus system due to its large size. One of my other interviewees, Laila, who often visits the Compound to see friends, explained that, in the past, the Compound was only accessible to those who worked for Aramco and had a company permit. She also explained that the space is not open to the Saudi public, with the exception of Saudi women who can visit friends if they are placed on a guest list. Discussing what the rules for Saudi

<sup>24</sup> Chloe Domat, “Saudization Takes Priority,” *Global Finance Magazine*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.gfmag.com/magazine/february-2019/saudization-takes-priority>.

<sup>25</sup> James Wynbrandt, *A Brief History of Saudi Arabia*, 2nd ed (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 252.

men were, however, she said “they’ve always been far more strict on Saudi guys.”<sup>26</sup> Laila also said that the roads that connect the plots mirror those in “suburban California.” Noura told me about the Compound’s leisure facilities, describing to me in detail the riding stables, gyms, baseball and soccer fields, and the golf course.

As in family homes outside the Compound, so too is gender segregation enforced in the homes of the Saudi women in the Compound. Le Renard, whose ethnographic research analyzes the experiences of young Saudi women in Riyadh, argues that cultural and social norms in Saudi Arabia are shaped through spatial interaction. Her research is based upon her time living and interviewing young women at universities in Saudi Arabia and concludes that gender segregation is at the heart of the disciplinary practices and power relations that dominate Saudi society.<sup>27</sup> My study builds upon Le Renard’s argument by examining moments at the level of individual experience when spatial organization and separation continue to impact the lives of young women.

In homes within the Compound, some interviewees explained to me that space is organized with the explicit aim of gender segregation. Unlike the dwellings of their expatriate neighbors, most Saudi homes feature *majlis*, or separate sitting rooms for each gender. These rooms are used when hosting guests to ensure privacy and comfort, as it ensures single men do not mix with single women. The women I interviewed explained that just as with homes outside of the Compound, their family ensured that their home had two *majlis* even though the original designs of the homes, crafted by the foreign company who built the Compound, did not include them. “This means that guests have to use the same entrance (one entrance not two leading to majlis) when we have them over,” Noura explained, as opposed to the two entrances used in the homes of those outside the Compound. This minute observation highlights how important gender segregation is to these Saudi families who go to great lengths to uphold societal gender norms in the home, even if it means changing the house’s fundamental design. Without the presence of an additional entrance, Noura’s family had to reconcile these norms and principles with the existing layout of the Compound. This fusion of domestic Saudi culture with that of the Compound demonstrates how the young women in this space have to live in a site that does

<sup>26</sup> Interview with young Saudi woman (E), phone interview, September 10, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women*, 13-16.

not have a singular cultural landscape. For Noura's Saudi family, their home expresses principles and values that differ from those of other expatriates in the Compound. The rules and expectations with which Noura comes into contact differ based on where she is and with whom she is interacting.

The inherent differences between the family home and the Compound also produce tensions in women's social lives. Noura told me that her father forbids her from seeing boys, both in and out of the Compound, a norm that was enacted by the majority of young Saudi women that I spoke with due to the importance of gender segregation. Noura told me of her father's anger when she was speaking to her male neighbors in the garden one evening. She seemed to explain his anger by saying that, "People take culture way more seriously, they place it above religion, so with my dad and wearing the hijab it is about me wearing it and not bringing shame to him especially in society."<sup>28</sup> She emphasized, though, that expatriates in the Compound do not have to follow these rules, making her less inclined to do so when her father was not at home. Moreover, she explained that her home "does not have boundary walls or gates like [her] friends that live outside the Compound," meaning that comparatively, her family home is more connected to the neighborhood than those living in traditional Saudi homes outside the Compound.<sup>29</sup> Laila, who lives in a home outside the Compound, explained to me that the boundary wall and gates of her home ensured that "your community is your nuclear and distant family, not those around you...[y]ou don't hang out with kids or families in your neighborhood."<sup>30</sup> By contrast, the Compound does not have these design features, meaning Noura can interact with her neighbors relatively freely. This comparison demonstrates how the design of the Compound enables young women like Noura to have different experiences from the women who live elsewhere. Noura's admission that she is less inclined to embrace her father's rules as a result of living alongside people who do not follow these rules also highlights that this space and its design give Noura the choice to behave differently and break her family's rules.

These subtle protestations also manifest themselves in more overt displays of indifference towards the rules imposed by the family. Noura told

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<sup>28</sup> Interview B.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Interview E.

me how she would sneak out of the house to hang out with boys behind her parents' backs, using her ability to drive in the compound to go to other people's houses and spend time with them there.<sup>31</sup> She also told me how she would drive purely for pleasure. "My friends from school would come into the Compound and we would cruise," she said.<sup>32</sup> Though this behavior may be considered normal outside of the context of Saudi Arabia, Noura's ability to do these things is incredibly unusual. Noura herself conceded that life in the Compound as a young girl afforded her benefits like driving and that her friends who lived outside of this environment would never be able to enjoy such freedom. Aesha, another interviewee, discussed similar freedoms growing up in the Compound. She would often go to friends' houses to meet male friends.<sup>33</sup> She told me that she thought it was "good to see boys... it made me less awkward being around them, and made me think about it as more of a normal interaction rather than something that is a big deal."<sup>34</sup>

The accounts of both Noura and Aesha show that they are mindful of expectations but also contest them in their own way by embracing the freedoms afforded to them within the walls of the Compound. Le Renard labels actions such as Noura's "transgressions."<sup>35</sup> Le Renard argues that these practices have "a public aspect that make them transformative: [t]hey spread among young women and contribute to shifting the boundaries of behaviors acceptable in public for young women."<sup>36</sup> Yet she also argues that these actions should not be analyzed as "forms of resistance," adding that it is crucial to know the young women's justifications for their actions "in order to locate... their oppositional value."<sup>37</sup> Because the inhabitants of the Compound are the only individuals that have access to the space, this means that this site cannot be defined using Le Renard's notion of the public. In contrast with public areas, the wide-open spaces of the Compound do not have an audience to observe Noura and Aesha's transgressions. Le Renard's explanation, however, does illustrate that these

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with young Saudi woman (I), phone interview, September 7, 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Amelie Le Renard, "Young Urban Saudi Women's Transgressions of Official Rules and the Production of a New Social Group," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 9.3 (2013): 108.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 110.

women are not enacting forms of resistance because they are simply embracing the liberties that the Compound affords them: in fact, their actions cannot even be considered “transformative” because they are not seen by others outside the Compound and therefore cannot spread and become “acceptable” elsewhere.

Similarly, the work of Mahmood also complicates our understanding of Noura and Aesha’s actions. Mahmood argues against agency being interpreted solely as a form of resistance. She proposes that we understand agency from the position of the actor. Using this framework heightens our perception that Noura and Aesha’s ability to exercise their agency is not contingent upon them breaking rules. Mahmood proposes that their actions should not typify them as anarchic resisters; to do so would define agency as taking action out of the desire for change. In fact, Noura and Aesha show that they engage in these behaviors simply because they enjoy them and are not attempting to make a broader social statement by behaving as such.

Noura verbalized this to me through her critique of women’s rights activists who were demanding that women in Saudi Arabia be given the right to drive:

I don’t know why people are making a big deal out of it, I don’t know why people are surprised at them being imprisoned, they went against the law? I remember when they first came out driving, Loujain al-Hathloul for example... the way she was doing it, wasn’t the smartest way. She made it about defying the culture and saying how bad the government is—that’s not smart.<sup>38</sup>

Noura makes plain that although she enjoys driving, she is strongly critical of women who would use this act to demand greater freedoms in Saudi society. In her exploration of transgressions in Saudi Arabia, Le Renard references women she interviewed who, like Noura, also criticize other Saudi women who express a desire to drive. In the past, women who publicly demanded greater rights for women were disparagingly labeled “liberal intellectuals” by those she interviewed. Noura explicitly does not break these rules because she wants her behavior to be accepted by society. This is in part due to the association of

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<sup>38</sup> Interview B.



making such demands with being “Western.” Noura explained to me that the women advocating for driving rights were described as “Western” by the state and the media. This is a charged label in Saudi Arabia, stemming from a general disapproval of liberal European and American norms and the country’s fraught relationship with Britain and the United States following the discovery of oil on the Saudi Peninsula. Particularly during the Islamic Awakening in the 1980s, many Saudis viewed American assertions of Saudi women’s perceived need for “liberation” as an inappropriate and arrogant judgment of Saudi culture. Certain anti-colonial liberation movements in the country even viewed it as a form of colonial subjugation.<sup>39</sup> As such, when people use the term “Western,” they are typically implying that the subject is in some way either against or unreasonably critical of the Saudi nation.

This history explains why many Saudis see Noura’s enjoyment of driving as a pleasure born out of privilege; outside of the Compound—until June of 2018 when the ban was lifted—women attempting to drive would have been imprisoned or labeled as anti-Saudi, two damning repercussions that Noura never had to face. The Compound granted her the ability to enjoy greater freedoms while distancing herself from labels such as “Western” or “liberal,” evidence that the Compound permits women the freedom to break the rules enforced outside of its gates.

Noura’s longing for the reinstatement of rules that prevented women outside of the Compound from driving may strike us as odd, as though she is voluntarily submitting to rules that prevent her from fully exercising her agency. The work of Mahmood is important here to remind us that we must still recognize her agency within the framework of her society. Mahmood proposes that Noura can exercise agency while submitting to societal norms imposed by the state. This nuance is important to recognize; as Mahmood points out, too often actions like Noura’s are read as a desire to challenge authority figures. Instead, her transgressions are in this case simply a demonstration of agency; Mahmood argues this on the basis of an interpretation of agency that encompasses both resisting and complying with norms.<sup>40</sup> This captures Mahmood’s argument that Noura can theoretically retain her agency while both abiding by and transgressing society’s norms.

<sup>39</sup> Madawai al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

The privacy that the Compound affords these women also explains why they can break rules with greater ease than the women outside the Compound. This becomes clear by applying Goffman's theory that conceptualizes behavior as a performance. In particular, Goffman's theory is useful because of the different roles Saudi women must perform in different contexts. This aligns with Goffman's conceptualization of space as a stage with the front stage being where you perform in front of an audience and the "back stage" being where you are your "true" self, typically in the home. In the case of the compound, its high walls and open spaces mean that women cannot be seen by members of the public. As such, they do not need to adhere to certain rules, such as wearing the abaya outside of the home, because there is no audience present that expects them to do so. While outside of the Compound, the state and religious institutions mandate that the abaya must be worn during the "passage through mixed public space, between the different women's spaces and the private space," the fact that women in the Compound are not visible to the public means they can overlook these rules.<sup>41</sup>

Interviewees Noura and Aesha explained the practical consequences this had in day-to-day life. Noura discussed the complex role this societal norm played in her upbringing, saying that while she initially embraced not wearing the abaya in the Compound, "chilling in the park or playing sports without it on," she was "ridiculed" by some of her friends and argued strongly with her family for not wearing the abaya in public.<sup>42</sup> She said that after a period of tension with her father who made clear that by the time she turned 16 she would be expected to abide by this norm, she chose to wear the abaya in public spaces more often. However, now that she is studying abroad for university, she never wears it, telling me that her enjoyment not wearing it as a child in the compound gave her the confidence to make this decision in college. Two other interviewees also decided not to wear the abaya while studying abroad, instead opting for a less-conspicuous hijab or in one case a beanie.

Viewed in the context of Goffman and Mahmood's theories, this extract highlights that the Compound is a space that both controls and enables women's ability to exercise their agency. This ability is largely dependent

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<sup>41</sup> Amelie Le Renard, "Only for Women: Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Journal* 62.4 (2008): 616.

<sup>42</sup> Interview B.

upon the audience of the space. Goffman's theory reminds us that the people (audience) that surround a person influences how an individual behaves. Noura is able to avoid performing certain behaviors in the Compound due to the lack of an audience. Though her parents and certain friends may expect her to wear the abaya outside the home, the lack of an audience, and the open space in the Compound grants her the ability to sit in the park or play sports without it on. The reality that women outside of the Compound lack such a choice emphasizes that Noura's ability to negotiate norms is atypical.

Noura's excerpt demonstrates Mahmood's argument that women still have agency, even when they are complying with norms. Noura may abide by certain norms in the home and alter them when outside and in the presence of a different audience, but that does not change her innate ability to exercise her agency. Noura's awareness of her need to alter her behavior in different places demonstrates that the rights of young Saudi women cannot be viewed in a singularly: agency works differently in different spaces and at different moments.

This moment with Noura is also profound in that it embodies the switching of her, to use Goffman's terminology, front and "back stage." Goffman's conceptualizations of the front and "back stage" is that the former is where individuals act learned behaviors in public spaces for unknown audiences and the latter is where the individual acts of their own will, typically in the home, with familiar audience members like family and friends. What Goffman does not theorize, however, is the possibility of these stages switching. In Noura's case, this occurs because the home is not the "back stage" as she must comply with certain norms, such as wearing the abaya, due to the presence of certain audience members (her father) that expect her to do so. By comparison, the open space of the Compound, with no audience—which is theoretically the non-private "front stage"—allows her to negotiate these norms and behave as she typically would in the privacy of the home.

This switch appeared at other moments in my research, also appearing in my analysis of two other locations: the restaurant, and the family homes outside of the Compound. For one interviewee, Amaal, this switch occurred in the home. Amaal shared a story that demonstrated to me just how interconnected the rooms of the house were by vocalizing one rare moment of privacy that resulted in a powerful moment of self-discovery:

All of my sisters didn't listen to music, they listened to Islamic

recitations, and music was never played out loud in our home because my parents didn't allow it. I was the first out of my sisters to ever listen to music, but I did it under my hood (in bed). I started out with Hannah Montana, then the Jonas Brothers and then Justin Bieber. My younger sister always follows everything that I did, but when I became more religious I stopped listening to music and I felt bad, and said to her, 'I'm the one that got you into this music it isn't good, I took you down the wrong path' but I realized that this was silly. I remember one night that I decided that I was going to be a better Muslim and give up on music, but I started crying because music means so much to me and I couldn't go without it.<sup>43</sup>

This image of Amaal attempting to muffle the sound of her music underneath a hood and a duvet is striking. Despite her listening to music in her own room, she is painfully conscious of her decision's wider implications and the challenge that this act poses to the rules imposed in the home. Her fear highlights the profound interconnectedness between family members that exists in the home; what one person does can easily be seen or heard by others.

Another striking aspect of Amaal's narration of this event is that it took place in her own bedroom, a space that in most households offers greater privacy than anywhere else in the dwelling. Amaal's intense awareness of how her actions would not be allowed outside of her bed makes clear that her behavior is dependent upon what area of the home she is occupying and at what time. The home is typically considered to be a "back stage" region in Goffman's theory, as it is typically where individuals can be their true selves. However, this extract from Amaal tells us a different story. It appears that even in her "back stage" region (the home) she, in fact, feels uncomfortable acting as she wishes; though she has some privacy in her bed, she is highly aware that even in this space, that behavior is not allowed.

Tying the insular and close-knit nature of the home and its structure into this equation, it becomes clear why some interviewees like Amaal felt that their behavior was confined to certain small spaces in which they could truly be themselves. This conclusion also presents the hypothesis that the "back stage"

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with young Saudi woman (C), phone interview, August 29, 2018.

region has moved to a different location outside of the home enabling women like Amaal to engage in behaviors like listening to her music with greater ease. Amaal clearly recognizes that in this space, there are certain rules that she must be wary of, even if she does not agree with them.

My conversations with interviewee Laila on the space of the restaurant also brought to light that this switching of the “front stage” and “back stage” occurs in public spaces. Laila explained this in a conversation that she had with friends who attend Al-Faisal University in Riyadh. Her friends had recently told her about the emergence of new cafes “where people go on blind dates, which I found to be strange because they talked about it so casually, and that wasn’t something that you could talk about in a positive way in high school.”<sup>44</sup> Laila explained that the men and women were able to go on these dates because of the lack of religious police and the more relaxed attitudes on gender mixing in public spaces. Her friends also explained, however, that the bathrooms of these cafes, cars, or other semi-private spaces in public were being used by boys at the University to have sex with women. She further complicated the story however by saying that she found the situation:

...disturbing...because they explained how people conflate hymens with virginity, and they said that what is generally accepted as a good man or boyfriend is a guy who had not had vaginal sex with you, but they may have anal sex instead, which is weird. I find that strange and hadn’t heard about that until two weeks ago.<sup>45</sup>

My initial shock at hearing this story was magnified once I asked other interviewees about whether they dated boys in Saudi Arabia. Many answered that when they were younger, they never mixed with boys unless they were family members or friends of their siblings. Some mixed with boys occasionally without their parents knowing, but this was rare. Aesha, an interviewee who is now a university student in the US, explained that she gave up on the idea of dating altogether from a young age because she saw it as useless:

Boys never want to marry the girl that they date because they want

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<sup>44</sup> Interview E.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

the woman they marry to be as virginal and pure as possible... they won't want to marry someone if they've gotten with you before, so there's no point in dating Saudi boys.<sup>46</sup>

Aesha's statement demonstrates her belief that she has no control over how boys engage with her romantically; the relationship is defined by male expectations of women as either marriage material or as the source of a casual sexual relationship. Aesha's indifference to dating is significant in that it highlights a binary applied to women that is ingrained in the men with whom she interacts. Other women echoed similar sentiments in relation to boys and said that they too were not interested in dating. Instead, Aesha made clear that she expected families to dictate their daughters' relations with boys as they would ultimately decide which men they would be allowed to marry.

When I brought up the story that Laila told me, some of the women were also shocked, but many were not surprised. Aesha explained:

Just because we are segregated from a young age doesn't mean that the 'f—boy' trend doesn't exist in Saudi...there are lots of boys taking advantage of the ability to hook up with [women] more easily at the moment, whilst also making sure that they can marry someone who fits with the desired more traditional...image of a woman that their family will want them to marry.<sup>47</sup>

The comparison between these stories demonstrates how the ongoing social liberalization being implemented by current political reforms is resulting in these "new" sexual interactions taking place. However, although these events may be "new" in the sense of their location, they are still reproducing traditional gender dynamics. The interactions separate women as those who engage in these public sexual acts, and those who do not as they remain adherent to the values of the home. This dynamic perpetuates the binary of women as either "saint/sinner" or "virgin/whore," a binary that strips them of their ability to define their sexual identity. As such, although these sexual interactions are new, they preserve long-established expectations of women.

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<sup>46</sup> Interview I.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

It is also vital to recognize the family-imposed rules that these boys continue to adhere to. This is demonstrated both in the nature of the sexual encounters themselves, and in their explicit desire to have a virginal wife. Although Laila explained that these sexual encounters occurred in multiple locations, she emphasized the popularity of the bathrooms in these cafes or restaurants with private stalls as the main sites where these relations took place. Regarding spaces and sexual sociability, Green et al. argue that “space, far from being a passive backdrop to social and sexual relations, plays an active role in the constitution of those relations.”<sup>48</sup> Green et al. also promote a spatial analysis similar to the work done in this paper that argues for space to be understood as both reflective of sexualities but also as a factor that plays in the production of sexualities.<sup>49</sup> Their work theorizes the gay bathhouses, bathrooms, and other public spaces where sexual encounters became normalized during the 1970s in the US. Specifically, they argue that “the public toilet occupies a very specific place in cultural binaries that divide the social world into public and private, dangerous and safe and dirty and clean.”<sup>50</sup> This analysis leads them to explain why the relations that occur in this space are classified “as ‘nasty’ sex that does not invite romantic sentiments, the illusion of long-term commitment or the heteronormative construction of good, clean, and reproductive sex.” They conclude that “the unauthorized sexual space of the bathroom fosters a kind of incitement to the taboo... spaces where prohibited or otherwise unthinkable behavior becomes possible or even desirable.”<sup>51</sup>

The ways in which young Saudis are taking advantage of public spaces, such as restaurant bathrooms and car parks, to engage in these sexual acts rather than in the home suggests that the expectations imposed by the family remain a powerful counter-force to the increasing gender mixing occurring in public spaces. The sexual acts themselves can also be seen to encourage, as Aesha explained, a “hook-up” culture, rather than the pursuit of long term relationships. This is tied to the persistence of the cultural norms attached to marriage whereby families are typically the orchestrators of marriages. Moreover, the anal aspect of the encounter is important in that it too demonstrates how

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<sup>48</sup> Isaiah Green, Mike Follert, and Jamie Paquin, “Space, Place and Sexual Sociality: Towards an “Atmospheric Analysis,” *Gender, Work and Organization* 17.1 (2010): 8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.



vaginal sex before marriage remains taboo. Therefore, although the emergence of these sexual encounters is a result of the newfound social liberalization related to gender mixing and segregated spaces, it is clear that the pre-existing socio-cultural norms, that forbid vaginal sex and sexual relations between men and women in the home, remain dominant. The ethos of this social liberalization and the changes it is making are also relocating the site of possibility from the subject to the space; whereas beforehand, men and women could decide to transgress rules on their own accord, the alteration of public space means that the space itself enables the act of intercourse, which is restricted or marginalized elsewhere. In essence, this space and the behavior that it facilitates is starkly contrasted with rules imposed in the home.

Comparing this moment with the excerpt from the previous chapter where Amaal could only listen to her music under her duvet in bed so that her family could not hear it is powerful. What is becoming gradually more apparent as we compare the home with the public space of the restaurant is a clear shift in the locations of the “front” and “back stage” as described by Goffman. Though the sexualization of public space differs from the case of Amaal listening to music, both events are moments where young women are behaving in public (front stage) how Goffman conceptualizes they would at home (“back stage”). These women can now perform certain taboo behaviors with greater ease in spaces like the restaurant or café than in the home, especially in the case of Amaal given the newly introduced feature of music playing in restaurants. It is the insular nature of the home with its dominant norms preventing these behaviors from occurring in the house itself. The newfound fluidity of possible behaviors being facilitated by places like the restaurant is sharply contrasted with the insular, static nature of the home as described in the previous section.

This collection of experiences from the three different spaces of the Compound, restaurant, and family home propose that young women engage in different behaviors dependent upon the location and the audience members present. Moreover, it also highlights that behavior typically associated with certain spaces like the home is blurring.

Similarly, the Compound also heavily influenced the lives of interviewees by allowing them to pursue hobbies that in some cases were not encouraged by family members. Noura spoke in depth about the leisure

facilities in the Aramco Compound such as the “game rooms, bowling alley, cinema, public library and several parks.”<sup>52</sup> She prefaced this list by saying, “I know they all sound mundane but back then most of these were only available in Aramco.”<sup>53</sup> Noura told me about the wide array of sporting facilities such as “running tracks, soccer, cricket and baseball pitches... also public pools, gyms that are free for residents, horse stables and a golf course.”<sup>54</sup> Aesha, who did not live in a Compound but would visit friends and family there, told me how she used to visit the Compound to go horse riding with her uncle, but that her father made her stop when she turned 16 because riding was seen as unsuitable by older members of her family who disapproved of her “doing sports or exercising a lot.”<sup>55</sup> She explained why they thought this by saying, “once you start developing as a woman, these aren’t okay.”<sup>56</sup> Aesha speaks here of the threat of tearing the hymen while doing these activities. The vaginal membrane historically in Saudi Arabia, and many other countries, is linked to virginity and must be present for marriage.<sup>57</sup> Aesha’s excitement struck me when we discussed her love of being able to ride horses in the Compound, as it was something that she greatly enjoyed. She made it clear that friends from her school who did not live in the Compound were unable to do this activity, both due to the lack of accessible public facilities, but also that society reiterated opinions similar to those of her family members who strongly disapprove of young women engaging in sports.

While the Compound provides these leisure and sporting activities, the pushback from Aesha’s family members serves as a reminder that the culture of the home stands apart from the Compound. Aesha’s family, as the dominant voice that determines what rules she must abide by, desires for her to not be influenced by the site and to behave as expected by her family in the home. This suggests that the home, especially for Aesha, is the site that defines which rules women can and cannot abide by. The expectations held by the family in the home contrasts with the open space of the Compound that allows Aesha to negotiate which of the rules she abides by. Using Goffman’s binary of front

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<sup>52</sup> Interview B.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Interview I.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Sameena Rahman, “Female Sexual Dysfunction Among Muslim Women: Increasing Awareness to Improve Overall Evaluation and Treatment,” *Sexual Medicine Reviews* 6.4 (October 2018): 539.

stage and back stage once more, the Compound presents a site that has clear boundary lines within which different behaviors are acceptable. Although the home may control certain acts, the facilities of the Compound, in this case, encourage them.

This is a dynamic that is also currently being experienced in homes outside of the compound where it was made clear by the interviewees that the home is presently acting as a bulwark against the changing norms of public space. The compound, therefore, presents something of a blueprint for the landscape that young Saudi women are currently navigating.

The Compound is also becoming a blueprint for some of the social changes being made as part of Prince Salman's Vision 2030 plan. His legalization of cinemas and women driving, formerly features unique to the compound, are now present in everyday Saudi society. This means that women outside the Compound are navigating unfamiliar spaces and experiencing tensions similar to those of Noura and Aesha inside.

When I spoke with Noura about these new changes, however, she demanded that I recognize the importance of entrenched "Saudi culture and societal expectations." She argued that "[t]he Prince will tell us one thing but it is my Father that I answer to, not him."<sup>58</sup> This statement illustrates the disjunction that exists between political laws on women and the reality of everyday life; while the Compound enables women to exercise agency, their decisions to ultimately abide by their family's expectations shows the authority that the family maintains. This dynamic mirrors trends that I have seen in other spaces – for young Saudi women, agency works at different moments in different spaces, and there are certain spaces that control or encourage agency. Noura in this piece, along with others in this research, show that women recognize these differences and act accordingly. Collectively, the alterations in their behavior prove that identity as a Saudi woman is not static, but changes depending upon the environment.

## CONCLUSION

As I compare my first interview with my last, it becomes apparent to me just how quickly change is occurring in Saudi Arabia. My first interview,

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<sup>58</sup> Interview B.

eight months ago, largely consisted of Reema explaining to me what it meant to live in a society dominated by gender segregation. In my last interview, with a girl named Maha seven months later, she told me about a recent concert where men and women were able to mix and dance together publicly.

This research shows that ongoing reforms alter depending on the relationship between women and the venue in question. Analysis of the home demonstrates that the family remains of vital importance to the lives of these young women; it is a community that maintains its values through the design features of the house itself, preventing events occurring outside the gates from permeating inwards. The sexual encounters occurring in restaurant bathrooms, interactions that in themselves are new, are inscribed with patriarchal power dynamics that exist in the home. For some, like Amaal, the rapid nature of the changes has made the public spaces that allow genders to mix uncomfortable, highlighting that while the freedom to engage in certain behaviors may be appreciated by some, for others it has stripped them of their desire to occupy gendered space. At this moment in Saudi Arabia, behavior that theorists like Goffman consider typical for private and public spheres is blurring; the actions of these women are tangibly altering the narrative of Saudi space as one defined by separation and privacy.

The Compound serves as a microcosm of the changes that Saudi society is currently undergoing. Noura and Aesha explained how this site grants them the opportunity to behave in ways that are not allowed in the home, or in locations outside of the Compound. It appears that the lack of an audience allows them to act without considering the rules imposed on them by their family or wider society. Crucially, Noura and Aesha did not consider breaking the rules an act of rebellion and did not want to be thought of as agents demanding change. Instead, their explanations highlight that their experiences are in no way related to resistance.

Collectively, these different sites of analysis demonstrate that, at present, being a woman in Saudi Arabia changes from one space to another. Women are exercising agency differently depending on the space they are in and the authority figures that are present. The tensions that these policies create within the family show that these changes clash with their deeply held values. To pretend that these policies are entirely beneficial and easily embraceable by the female population of Saudi Arabia would be misguided.

Such a simplistic view reinforces harmful narratives. By using the voices

of Saudi women in this research, I hope to have shown that reading headlines about Saudi Arabia rarely gives one an insight into the realities of these women. I texted one interviewee to ask how her peers at her US university reacted to the news that Saudi women were allowed the right to drive. Her response surprised me: “I was told by an American friend that she had read about me being able to drive and was so excited that I now knew what freedom was. This is not my idea of freedom. Do not tell me what my idea of freedom is.”<sup>59</sup> This statement struck me to my core, and serves as a reminder that women in Saudi Arabia are rarely analyzed on their own terms or through their own voice. Instead, Saudi women are consistently analyzed through Western conceptions of progress that glorify the changes being made by Prince Salman as liberating to women. The perpetuation of such discourse is reductive and unspecific and it reinforces the idea that Saudi women should be viewed as objects to be spoken about, rather than agents who can speak for themselves. Instead, when we see how the Compound, home, and restaurant operate in relationship to the state, family, and faith, we understand that being a woman in Saudi Arabia today is neither static nor simple.

Understanding the multi-faceted and complex ways in which Saudi women are negotiating contemporary tensions is also vital given Prince Salman’s marketing of Saudi women as symbols of the nation. Salman’s reforms use women’s liberation as a symbolic strategy to incentivize foreign investment and, as such, strip women of their agency by speaking to the international community on their behalf. The most profound example of this is Salman’s arrest of leading women’s rights activists campaigning for the right to drive occurring on the same day the lifting of the ban on women driving was announced. If one required more proof of the self-interest embedded in Prince Salman’s decision to allow these rights, look no further than the announcement itself, occurring first in Washington DC with a female spokesperson hand-picked by Prince Salman before being shared with the population in Saudi Arabia. This event is one of many examples that prove how Prince Salman uses Saudi women as symbols to present his leadership and the Saudi state as modern and liberal to the international community.

This study shows how portraying Saudi women in a singular dimension

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with young Saudi woman (K). WhatsApp interview, August 20, 2018.

ignores the stories and realities of other Saudi women. More powerful is Noura's assertion from earlier in this piece that stated "the Prince will tell us one thing but it is my Father that I answer to, not him."<sup>60</sup> This statement serves as a reminder that grand narratives and political strategies rarely provide a realistic insight into the lives of the people about whom they claim to speak. Moreover, it highlights that while Prince Salman's policies—in particular Vision 2030—attempt to reorient Saudi identities in order to secure his goal of "modernizing" the nation, statements like Noura's awaken us to the fact that society can, and is, pushing back against such rapid change; power remains within the home, regardless of whether Prince Salman's policy legislates as if the home is controlled directly by the state.

One limitation of this research is that it was not conducted within Saudi Arabia. Though the interviews gave me a glimpse into the lives of these 12 young women, experiencing the different sites and relations for myself would have nuanced my understanding. However, as I review the interviews, I realize that the separation forced me to engage deeply with the women I interviewed, to understand their stories fully, and to attempt to learn everything about them in a short span of time. The depth of these conversations and our sharing of struggles, life stories, and future prospects proved to me that beyond our cultural differences, our experiences as young adolescent female students are not glaringly different; we are all attempting to do well at university, negotiate our independence from our families, and think critically about our futures. The rich and powerful essence of these conversations is proof that scholarship must de-exceptionalize Saudi society and not study it as the "other." One area that requires this approach would be in the study of the 10 million foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, a group rarely discussed when analyzing contemporary issues within Saudi Arabia. The tensions surrounding this group, and their rights and citizenship in Saudi Arabia, deserves attention and further research. It is also a topic that shows Saudi Arabia to be a country experiencing societal pressures that a host of other nations are also currently going through.

Going forward, it will be interesting to see how the existing tensions between the authority figures of the family and the state analyzed in future research. As the social liberalization of Saudi public space continues and becomes more entrenched, the families of these women will be forced to decide what

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<sup>60</sup> Interview B.

aspects of this new Saudi culture they will allow into their lives. The addition of the voices of older generations, such as parents or grandparents, would be vital to such a study. Including these voices would aid in mapping the trajectory of the past experiences of women up to the present day.

Despite the huge array of changes that occurred in between my first and last interviews, what remains constant is the powerful relationship that exists between women in Saudi Arabia and the space they are in. This relationship must be understood in order to map changing behaviors and recognize how women exercise their agency while navigating the myriad norms that currently exist in different sites. Spaces can both control and liberate, and each site contributes to the complex inter-workings of changing power structures. The crucial element to our understanding is the inclusion of women's voices and a commitment to scholarship that does not impose a single narrative on Saudi women's stories.



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