
Racial And Gender Segregation In The Middle Eastern City

The Middle Eastern city is a mystic landscape that encapsulates the imagination, but how does the way we view or imagine the city influence the way cities are organized or even lived in? Do they treat everyone equally or does gender and race play a unique role in the way a city is developed?

Cities and countries all across the middle east tend to be some of the most segregated for women, foreign labor workers and in Kuwait for Arabs and bedouin, but is equality achievable in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait who tend to be oppressive towards women or foreign labor workers. For a country like Saudi Arabia that is deeply rooted in gender segregation there has been signs of improvement in gender equality, but this has been largely due to outside pressure from the international community. How does the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia compared to the treatment of Arab, Kuwaiti labor workers in Ahmadi and how does it shape the modern middle eastern city?

I would argue that gender and race play a big role in the way a city is shaped in the Middle East and that even though equality seems to be getting better, it's still not that great for women or even foreign labor workers in countries like Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. One of the readings we focused on was the Renard reading "A Society of Young People" which was about young women and how they fit into Saudi society. The author followed them into their places of work, the womans university at the mall and discussed the ways they were changing Saudi cities for the betterment of women. These women never declared themselves to be activists, but just women trying to live their lives. Even with the advances of gender rights there is still a ongoing discussion between islamists and liberals about whether or not these new rights are hurting Saudi society.

Islamists view these new rights as extremely westernized and that it may be having an adverse effect on Saudi society and liberals view them as progressing into the future. Before the current reforms, what were some of the restraints that were placed on women in Saudi society? Women didn't have the right to drive a car or even ride a bike. Saudi women were also not allowed to go out by themselves or much less be at a shopping center alone because they had to have a male guardian with them at all times. Saudi women also had to remain covered if they went out as well because in Saudi culture women are not to be seen by other men who aren't part of their immediate family without being covered. I also believe that Saudi women in the past were also restricted from employment as well as participating in shaping their government because they didn't have the ability to vote or even hold office. Maybe the biggest restraint that was placed on women was the ability to drive because it restricts your mobility within the city. Not being able

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to drive in a city like Riyadh can have an inimical effect on someone's ability to keep or even get a job and carry out your daily life. Having to walk everywhere can be a cumbersome task especially if someone isn't in the best physical shape.

In the Renard article he explains that in 1990 just after the first Gulf War 47 women took to the wheel in Riyadh, but they were arrested and some were even detained, if I remember correctly some are even still detained to this day. In 2011 several women started the Women2Drive campaign, but that was quickly defeated by the police and it was focused on giving women the right to drive, but the tide began to change. Women in 2015 were given the right to vote and even run for office and in June 2018 women were given the right to drive. It is expected to be opposition to this, but the king prince gave a televised speech in saying that this needed to happen for the betterment of their kingdom because of the threats from the international community. But just because they have some rights and they are now able to go out on their own are they able to explore all of the city, do they have access to certain areas?

Women are still restricted from some parts of the city as well. Parks are segregated and from the sounds of the Renard article women are even segregated to a woman's only floor in shopping centers across Riyadh. This is where I would say that women in Saudi Arabia have the same struggle that Arab labor workers had in Kuwait. In the article The Oil Town of Ahmadi since 1946 it examines and uses the Kuwait town of Ahmadi in a case study on the political and different social changes that took place during the modernization of Ahmadi. The town of Ahmadi was racially segregated into several sections, the first section was for the Senior Staff who was primarily British the second section was for the junior staff which was primarily Pakistani and Indian and then the Arab Village that housed the Kuwaiti's, Arabs and bedouin had it the worst out of anyone and it reflected the companies policy of ethnic segregation by the planning by the British planner Wilson. Even the hierarchy within the hospitals were segregated so you weren't able to receive the same quality of healthcare as the Senior staff and that has a huge impact on the quality of life that a city can provide. Senior Staff doctors treated the senior staff only in the hospital, never would they treat the junior staff or would the junior staff doctors treat the senior staff patients. The Arab and bedouin workers were treated by junior staff, but they were also the last to be treated. This really showed just how bad the social and ethnic inequalities really were in Ahmadi and they remained confined to certain areas. The Arabs had the Arab Village and they were strictly confined to that area and I believe this to be driven purely by racism. There were newspapers that actually brought some of these injustices to light and they were the al-Ittihad, but the news agencies that were the most critical of the racial segregation of Ahmadi were the al-Sha'ab and al-Fajr and they exposed just how bad the living conditions were for the Arab and Kuwait populations.

The al-Fajr exposed the treatment and housing accommodations that were constructed by the KOC and described them as deplorable and subpar and all the while the Pakistani and Indians

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got preferential treatment. The housing they lived in were basically huts and they didn't have amenities like running water, electricity, or toilets. Animals would also drink from the same drinking water as the humans and the water was also polluted making it technically undrinkable. Eventually the Arabs did get to move from these horrible conditions they had, to the north section of the city where the Pakistani and Indian (junior staff) were living largely in part to the pressure that was applied by the different news papers that held the KOC accountable. Kuwaiti employees also started to see promotions within the workplace as well as receiving scholarships for colleges and universities to study their area of work. They were also allowed to sit on the Board of the KOC which never happened before. When I was in the Navy I was stationed in Bahrain for 2 years and I got to see first hand how bad the treatment was for migrant workers as well as the religious sect Shia. It was very much like what the Arab and Bedouin workers went through. They were segregated to certain areas of the city of Manama and they were treated horribly at the work center by the other Arabs. Most of the time they were given the worst jobs on base and had to work longer hours than the military personnel that were attached to that command. Even though change came rather quickly for the Arabs and Kuwaiti change is slowly coming for women in Saudi Arabia, but in a country like Saudi Arabia that is still heavily reinforced by religion that change that change may take longer.

Even with the modernization of middle eastern cities and society there still is racial and gender segregation that occurs all over the middle east. Arab labor workers have come a long way with rights and desegregation, but the women are still struggling with that. Saudi women have gained some liberties, but they are still segregated, even at the workplace. This becomes problematic because how can you honestly belong to a city or lifestyle if you are constantly being restricted from certain areas based on your race or even gender how can you move through the city if your mobility is constantly being restricted? I don't believe that you're a member of that society if you are treated as a 2nd class citizen by restricting your movement or the places you can go in a city. Everyone regardless of race, social status, or even gender should be able to move freely as they wish.

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