

## **Ikhtilat as Patriarchal Expression: Gender Segregation and the Influence of Fathers**

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### **Abstract**

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Ikhtilat is prohibited in Saudi Arabia according to the state religious institutions. Therefore, most of the institutions in Saudi Arabia are gender segregated. However, there are places where Saudi males and females can mingle, such as hospitals, some private companies and King Abdullah University. Saudi schools and universities are gender segregated, but medical schools are co-educational. This chapter shows how Ikhtilat plays a critical role in influencing both women's and fathers' attitudes towards certain subjects. There are few subjects available to Saudi women that require Ikhtilat, such as medicine, nursing and media studies. Some women wanted to study subjects like medicine or media studies but their fathers prevented them because of Ikhtilat. Other women are studying these subjects since their fathers are open to Ikhtilat. However, there are women who impose restrictions on their studies by limiting their subject choices because of Ikhtilat. However, there is a disagreement amongst the participants whether the prohibition of Ikhtilat is rooted in Islam or social traditions. Participants from traditional families believe that Ikhtilat is forbidden in Islam, whilst other participants see the prohibition of Ikhtilat as part of social traditions.

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**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Higher Education, Ikhtilat, Saudi women, Gender, Segregation, Fathers, Subjects.

### **Introduction and Background**

What makes Saudi Arabia unique from other Muslim countries is the fact that Saudi Arabia is the only Islamic country that completely segregates both sexes in all walks of life. Alsweel (n.d.) attributes the reason for this to the fact that Saudi Arabia was historically not colonised by Western colonisers; "gender segregation in schools, universities charitable organizations, restaurants, government offices and other public spaces is one of the defining features of Saudi Arabia" (Merijer, 2010, p. 81). There is a common belief amongst the conservative clerics in Saudi Arabia that Ikhtilat (mixing between women and unrelated men in public places) could lead to decay and debauchery in society. They view women as temptation (Fitna) that incites men's lust, which eventually leads to adultery (Zina). Thus, they believe that gender segregation could protect society from moral decay (Doumato, 1992).

Yet, in reality sex segregation does not protect Saudi society from depravity, since Saudi society suffers from numerous social problems and corruption such as sexual harassment, rape, incest and adultery. The prohibition of Ikhtilat did not exist in Saudi Arabia until the Islamic awakening movement (the Sahwa Movement), which took place during the eighties (Merijer, 2010). When I was a child during the late 1980s, the males and females in my family gathered in the same room over tea or coffee at an aunt's or uncle's house. I noticed that they later socialised in different rooms. At that young age, I did not understand why one of my aunts refused to shake hands with my father when she used to do it every time they met. I remembered her telling my mother that shaking hands with unrelated men is haram (forbidden) in Islam. She learned this from her brother who had recently returned with extremist attitudes from the Soviet-Afghan War.

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The Awakening Movement began in 1987. It was based on a belief that society was taking a long nap, which had led to the Westernisation of society. Sahwa (awakening) thought stated that the ignorance of religion had contributed to the deviation of society from Islam.

Therefore, the purpose of the Sahwa Movement was to wake up society and bring it back to true Islam. The Awakening Movement is grounded in the idea of Ihtisab, which is the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice. As a result, people who believe in Sahwa should take the task of Ihtisab on themselves (Al-Ghathami, 2015; Hegghammer & Lacroix, 2007). This movement was accepted by the majority of Saudi society and was seen as a positive social change. During the Awakening Movement, society's thoughts were transformed into the extremist Islamic perspective. Women's issues were at the centre of Sahwa's jurisprudence. Sahwa movement members adopted the most radical doctrinal views of women's issues because they argued that the Westernisation of society began with women. They linked unveiling to the Westernisation of women. Therefore, they issued fatwas (rulings) on veiling and on the prohibition of women driving cars (Al-Ghathami, 2015). Accordingly, the majority of Saudi clerics believe that Ikhtilat is prohibited in Islam. One of these clerics is the prominent Saudi Islamic scholar Abdul-Aziz Bin Baz (the former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia), who issued a fatwa on the prohibition of coeducation in Islam.

He said that segregated educational institutions make women comfortable to be able to receive education without the need to wear a hijab or veil, as well as helping men focus on their studies without being distracted by exchanging glances or flirtation with female students (Al-Misnad, 1995). On the other hand, a moderate Saudi cleric Sheik Ahmed Al-Ghamdi (who was head of the Committee for Commanding Right and Forbidding wrong in Makkah) declared in the media in 2009 that Ikhtilat is not prohibited in Islam. His statement has made him the focus of criticism and censure by large segments of Saudi society including conservative clerics (Alriyadh Newspaper, 2010).

As a result of gender segregation, the basic dichotomy of public / private spheres are used quite differently in the Saudi context. As stated by Le Renard (2008) there are two public spheres, which are the male public sphere and the female public sphere, as well as a private sphere. He suggests that segregated institutions help in creating a public sphere for Saudi women; instead of staying at home they are able to engage in different activities, meet other women from a different class, background, sect and ethnicity. Nonetheless, there are some exceptions with respect to gender segregation. Saudi women can mingle with men in some workplaces such as hospitals and some private organisations. For instance, in the kingdom holding company owned by prince Alwaleed bin Talal, women can work alongside men even without wearing a veil or abaya (long black overcoat).

Patriarchal influences and gender expectations lead Saudi women to choose the study of particular fields at university level. These patriarchal influences may take the form of a father's intervention in their educational choices. However, the patriarchal system works differently depending on a woman's father. Some women bargain with patriarchal constraints, whilst others accommodate patriarchal constraints. Accordingly, women's agency is deployed differently depending on their attitudes towards gender norms and their father. In other words, some women come from traditional families and choose stereotypically feminine subjects because they want to meet their expected roles. On the other hand, some women from non-traditional families want to study traditionally masculine subjects. The father's attitude is reflected in the reasoning behind some women's choices to study traditionally masculine university fields of study, and others to reject them.

Women's subject choices were influenced too by whether the subject requires them to mix with unrelated men (Ikhtilat). Despite the ongoing debates amongst Saudi clerics around Ikhtilat and whether it is prohibited or permissible in Islam, the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa states that Ikhtilat is forbidden in Islam, based on its interpretations of the Quran and Hadith. Saudi people respect and trust in the Saudi state religious institution, which has great influence on Saudi public opinions. The reason for the prohibition of Ikhtilat is to protect a family's honour. In the Saudi context, this is linked to the chastity and purity of its female members (Kulczycki & Windle, 2011). Women who are involved in sexual relationships outside of marriage are perceived by society as impure and ineligible for marriage. Consequently, they bring shame to their family.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative method using a narrative approach was used to obtain and analyse the stories of Saudi women in higher education. The narrative method has become popular in educational research, as well as in the other social sciences research. It aims to explore human experiences and views of the world through storytelling. In narrative studies, the researcher listens to the participants' experiences and gives them the time to tell their stories.

Data collection can take different forms in narrative methods; for example, it could be in the form of interviews, observations, field notes, pictures, journal records and storytelling. I used a narrative approach, as I believed that it would assist me in understanding how gender expectations influence Saudi women's experiences in higher education.

The data were collected at two universities in Saudi Arabia. Both universities are located in the western province of Saudi Arabia. The first one is Red Sea University, which is located in Jeddah, and the second is Holy University located in Makkah. I recruited 100 female students and lecturers from both universities. First of all I recruited a sample of 50 participants (40 female students and 10 female lecturers) from Holy University. Then, another 40 female students and 10 female lecturers were recruited from different departments at Red Sea University. Snowball sampling was undertaken with participants at both Universities

## Results and Discussion

It is clear from the interviews that I conducted with a number of women in Saudi Arabia that Ikhtilat, which means mixing or mingling between men and women, plays a large role in influencing the decision of Saudi fathers in allowing their daughters to choose their fields of study. Regardless of whether the prohibition of Ikhtilat stems from Islamic religion or Arab tribal customs and traditions, Saudi female students have different views on the authenticity of Ikhtilat, as will be seen later. Furthermore, this chapter shows that my participants exercise their agency through accommodating their father's influence. They see a father's interventions as necessary for their education. Therefore, they accept the father's influence on their subject choices without resisting or bargaining.

### 1. Concerns Around Ikhtilat

Ikhtilat, or mingling between women and unrelated men, is prohibited in Islam based on the jurisprudences of, "the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa" in Saudi Arabia. "The Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa" is a Saudi religious organisation, which "offers state-sanctioned fatwa (religious decrees) on major social and political issues in the kingdom, and offer[s] advice directly to the Saudi king" (Schanzer & Miller, 2012, p. 1). This committee built on its justifications for the prohibition of Ikhtilat from its understanding of the Quran and Hadith. The Prophet Mohammed said, "I have not left a fitnah (trial, calamity, or cause for calamity) after me more than (the fitnah) with women for men" ( Sahih Muslim). According to the interpretations of Saudi senior ulema of this Hadith, women are seen as a temptation for men that could lead them to commit sins. Thus, males and females should be segregated (Khoja, 2012).

"Men and women are supposedly commanded by God not to interact or socialize with one another, except for their spouse and respective mahram" (Buisson, 2013, p. 100). The Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa believes that Ikhtilat is a tool for the demolition of morality of society. It argues that Ikhtilat promotes relationships between men and women that eventually lead to adultery. Furthermore, it expresses concern that Ikhtilat could lead women to give up their traditional expected roles as mothers and wives (Khoja, 2012). As a result, Ikhtilat is forbidden in Saudi Arabia to protect the chastity of men and women, as well as to protect society from corruption and moral decay (Buisson, 2013).

The Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa has credibility and moral legitimacy amongst Saudis, who trust and respect such an organisation. Thus, fatwas issued by the Committee have great influence on Saudis (Al-Ghathami, 2015). The questioning of the prohibition of Ikhtilat is a sensitive issue in Saudi Arabia as the prohibition has been ruled upon by the Committee. However, Ikhtilat has been the centre of debates in Saudi Arabia between the Islamic trend on the one hand and the liberal trend on the other hand. This was seen particularly after the establishment in 2009 of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, which is the first co-educational university in Saudi Arabia.

The Islamic trend believes that Ikhtilat is forbidden, whilst liberals argue that Ikhtilat is permissible in Islam. As a consequence, one prominent cleric - Sheikh Abdullah Al-Barrak - called those who believe in the permissibility of Ikhtilat to be called infidels, because he considered them as apostates from Islam. Debates about Ikhtilat are not limited to disagreements between liberals and Islamists, but are also seen in dissension within the Islamic trend itself. For example, consider Abdul Latif Al-Sheikh, who is descended from a prestigious religious family.

(He is a grandson of the Muslim revivalist and reformer Muhammad ibn Abd Al-Wahhab, who contributed to the establishment of the Saudi state.) Sheikh Abdul Latif Al-Sheikh claims that Ikhtilat existed in the era of the prophet; therefore, it is not prohibited in Islam (Al-Sheikh, 2010). Nonetheless, the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa is the only official religious organisation that can issue fatwas.

Hence, any jurisprudential opinions that are contrary to the state Committee's fatwas should be ignored. According to this Committee, Ikhtilat is forbidden in Saudi society. Most of the participants revealed that their fathers influenced their decision in their choice of specialisation. Some fathers prevented their daughters from choosing certain disciplines or studying in certain colleges due to social customs and traditions, and cultural and religious heritage. Saudi fathers may prevent their daughters from studying a certain subject because of Ikhtilat, as can be seen from the interview with Muna, a student in her final year studying chemistry:

"My father only has one dream in which I become a teacher. He maybe believes that teaching is the best for me, because he has experience in life and I am young and I know nothing. He wants me to be a teacher, not in a company or medicine and nursing, because he is concerned about Ikhtilat. I told him that after I finish studying chemistry I want to work in hospital laboratories or a company, then he said to me, 'it is either teaching or nothing.'" In the same context Fatima, who is an outstanding Computer Science student who has obtained a patent, narrated how her father made her give up her dream of studying medicine so as not to mix with men, either at college or in a hospital: "I love dentistry and I had a desire to study it since I was in middle school. I felt that it would be something fun. But my father refused, so I had to choose Computer Science. He is now happy... The most important thing from his point of view is that there is no Ikhtilat." It can be said that whether the subject requires Ikhtilat or not influences Saudi women's educational decisions. It is likely that a female student will not choose a particular specialty if it conflicts with her religious and cultural beliefs, as a number of female students explained how their fathers made them choose other specialties rather than medicine because of the possibility of mixing with men. Norris (2009) points out in his study that religious culture plays an influential role in women's access to leadership positions. In non-Muslim societies, women are more successful in obtaining full ministerial and legislative rights compared with those in the non-Muslim communities.

Fatima was not the only women whose father prevented her from studying medicine. In my sample there were quite a number of Saudi women whose fathers prevented them from achieving their dreams of studying medicine or media studies, because of Ikhtilat. Some fathers refused to enrol their daughters in Medical School, because of the possibility of mixing with men, as they believed it would be a way for their daughters to become involved in relationships with unrelated men, which could lead to adultery. Adultery by women in Saudi Arabia is not only a crime punishable by Sharia Law, but rather it brings shame to their families or tribes. Furthermore, a woman who is involved in sexual relationships is seen by Saudi society as impure, which affects her worthiness for marriage. A woman's chastity in Saudi Arabia is linked to family honour. Therefore, male members in the family should protect the family honour by protecting the chastity and purity of the female members (Kulczycki&Windle, 2011). Accordingly, the reason behind some Saudi fathers preventing their daughters from studying medicine or media studies is to protect the family honour.

Other fathers also prevent their daughters from taking media studies due to social barriers, such as the appearance of the girl's name on television or in newspapers. One of these girls Samar, is a lecturer in the Department of Physics in the female section at Holy University: "I wanted to study medicine, but my father was initially opposed because of customs and traditions. He is very conservative and deeply religious. I tried to change his mind and then he was convinced, but unfortunately I did not get accepted by the College of Medicine. Also my sister wanted to take media studies but my father again refused because it is shameful that women appear on TV. He did not want me to study at the Department of Medical Physics, because he did not want me to work in a hospital for fear of Ikhtilat, and he prevented my sister from working in a hospital after she graduated from university." Mixing with men is considered one of the main impediments that prevent female students from studying certain disciplines such as medicine or media studies.

The prohibition often comes from fathers since they do not wish their daughters to study these disciplines for religious and social reasons, due to fear of people talking about the reputation and honour of their daughters, where the consequence is rejection from their community. To understand why mixing between men and women is forbidden in Islam and why I came to this finding, the concept of sexuality in Islam needs to be addressed.

As mentioned by Baden (1992), sex according to Sharia laws is one of the necessities in the life of a Muslim; however, at the same time it could lead to a morally corrupt society if it is not controlled. Indeed, the Qur'anic orders urge marriage to prevent the occurrence of adultery; they also stress the observance of modesty and restraint in any place where there is mixing between men and women.

Joumanah works as a lecturer in the Faculty of Sharia (religion) in the female section at Holy University. She recalled the days of her youth when she was at high school saying: "I wanted to study medicine, but my father was not in favour of this idea. He was dismissive of this idea due to Ikhtilat. It was also at a time when a lot of male relatives were studying at Medical College. I remembered that my father asked them about the type of study at Medical College and they told him it was a mixed college. I spoke to my father regarding my decision to study at the College of Medicine and he told me that the College was mixed male and female and female students did not wear the hijab. He said that it would be hard for me to study there as I am religiously committed to some extent, let alone studying at a mixed university whose female students did not wear their headscarves. This was thirty years ago, the situation has changed now." Jude, a lecturer in the Art department at Holy University revealed: "My father was supporting my participation in art exhibitions as long as there was no Ikhtilat in the galleries, but if it was mixed he asked me to take one of my brothers with me as a male guardian. I suffered for about a year; he thought that the acquisition of painting and sculpture tools was only a waste of money. But, after he began to see my work and hear about my success in Saudi society he changed his mind and encouraged me."

As can be seen from the interviews with the women, the reasons behind fathers preventing their daughters from studying certain disciplines seems to also be due to social impediments. The main reason behind the intervention of fathers in the educational decisions of their daughters is to protect the honour of their families, people talking and its negative impact on discrediting their daughters. Samiha, a student studying Human Resources at Red Sea University told me about the contradictions experienced by a Saudi father because of society, customs and traditions: "I wanted to study nursing but my father said no since it is shameful for a woman to study nursing because of Ikhtilat. He used to say our women are not allowed to study nursing. He does not care whether Ikhtilat is Halal or Haram (forbidden) religiously. He cares about people and their words. For that reason I studied HR; I could do nothing. He asked me to work in women-only banks and I agreed with him; I want to work in a respectable place where there is no mixing with men. My brother works in a mixed company and he said that he feels harassed by girls working there in terms of their voices, in the way they talk, their clothes. A woman's voice is awrah (nakedness), especially if she speaks in an alluring and soft voice. Women should speak in a serious voice. My brother owns a company and he wanted my sister to work with him but my father refused. "

Abeer, a Saudi girl studying marketing whose parents are separated, is a divorced mother of two children and lives with her father and her stepmother. She told me about her story with her father: "My father did not oppose my choice to study marketing, as long as it was not medicine, since our customs and traditions discourage restrain girls from studying medicine. My father sees it is as hard to let me study or work in mixed places because of the talk of people and his belief that his daughter lives her life freely without censorship, or that his daughter works until late at night. Even if I worked as a receptionist at a clinic it would be impossible for him to accept that. But after my divorce the restrictions became more to the extent that my father prevented my younger sister from going to university because of me believing that university education is the reason behind my divorce. All my female cousins are educated and one of them works outside the city where she lives in her own flat. Her parents support her therefore she is successful. The father and mother's role cannot be ignored. My father and my mother are against me. Their thinking is confined to the marital home being the only Kingdom for a girl, even if it is a failed marriage."

It may be that the father has a particular viewpoint on the rejection of his daughter studying medicine; this view appears to be influenced by the social roles played by both men and women in Saudi society. As Abeer continues: "My younger sister is very talented as she got high grades in high school. She wanted to study medicine but my father disapproved. He believes that if a woman obtained a degree or a job then she could make a living and she would dominate a man... He wanted us to be dependent on a man since he thought that a man is the strongest and the protector of women... I believe that his thoughts are absolutely wrong." Conversely, Hana a lecturer in the Department of Physics reported on the role of the local community in influencing some fathers in terms of the issue of Ikhtilat; she said: "Ikhtilat was not the reason behind my father's rejection of my studying medicine.

You know here in the society of Makkah or in general Hijaz society [including Makkah, Jeddah and Madinah] there is permissiveness with regard to the issue of Ikhtilat. For example, Hijazi girls grow up with their male cousins and neighbours until they turn twenty, then they start to wear headscarves or veils...men and women in ancient Makkah or the Hejaz region (Makkah, Madinah, Jeddah) mingled in all areas."

There was no separation between the sexes as it currently happens. The prohibition of the mixing of men and women is an alien custom to Hijazi society, as reported by Radwa a lecturer in the Faculty of Sharia: "When I was very young I never wore headscarves. We were living with my male cousins in the same house. I consider them as brothers. However, when I was in middle school I knew from my religious teacher that when a girl reaches puberty it is not permissible for her to mingle with men. She explained to us who Mahrams (male kin) are and whom I can show myself to without a veil. Then, I found out that what I learned in school is totally different from the reality in which I live. Hence, my life began to take a different path and since that I began to wear the hijab. During prayers the woman covers her body except her face and hands. This applies when she meets her male relatives. Therefore, I started wearing a headscarf in middle school then girls in our family started to wear it one after the other."

Through the interviews with female students in the present study, it is possible to identify the main factors that drive fathers to forbid their daughters to study a particular specialty; they are social and cultural factors. In conclusion, religion and social customs have a huge impact on a father's decision regarding a girl's' subject choice. This finding is in agreement with those of King (2003), who explored the effect of religion on fathers' involvement with their children. He conducted his study with 810 fathers in the United States. He found that religious fathers have great involvement with their children. Moreover, the findings of this study are consistent with the study of Igbinedion (2011), which aimed to investigate the perception of factors that influence students' vocational choice of secretarial studies in tertiary institutions in Neheria. It found that parents are considered one of the factors that influence students' selection of secretarial studies.

Furthermore, this finding to some extent is similar to the findings of Meyer et al.'s study (1998), which was about Islam and the extension of citizenship rights to women in Kuwait. The results of their study showed that moderate Islam supports giving more citizenship rights to women, whilst those who follow the radical Islamist approach do not encourage it. When comparing the two studies, I find that the Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Fatwa adopts very conservative interpretations of Islam especially those concerning women's issues, which somewhat limit the role of women and prevents them from obtaining their full rights. This explains the numerous religious barriers that may be faced by Saudi women at various stages of their lives. Again, a study carried out by Norton & Tomal (2009) found that there is a relationship between religion and women's educational attainment. Religion could affect women's education, whether it is primary, secondary or higher education. Interestingly, Islam has a significant effect on the education of women compared to other religions, which increases the number of illiterate women and reduces the number of women at the various educational stages. In addition, a study conducted by Lerner (1989) revealed the role of religious affiliation in women's educational attainment. That is to say, the religious affiliation of females has a great effect on the number of educational levels completed by them.

However, the results of the current study are contrary to the results of Naugah's study (2011), which explored factors affecting the choice of science subjects amongst girls at secondary school level in Mauritius. The study shows that parents do not influence the decision of their daughters in the selection of scientific disciplines — in this study parents said that they leave this matter to their daughters. Differences in the results between the two studies may be due to the multiple interpretations of Islam. There is no one comprehensive understanding of Islam; rather there are many interpretations of Islam. For example, Saudi Arabia follows the Hanbali School of Islamic Law, which is different from the Hanafi School of Islamic Law that is predominant in Mauritius. A religious motive appears to be the reason behind the refusal of Saudi fathers of Ikhtilat. As a result, they prevent their daughters from studying certain disciplines that require mixing with men such as medicine, nursing and media studies. In Islam, there are interpretations of the Quran and the Sunnah that forbid mixing between the sexes. God said:

O wives of the Prophet, you are not like anyone among women. If you fear Allah, then do not be soft in speech [to men], lest he in whose heart is disease should covet, but speak with appropriate speech (33). And abide in your houses and do not display yourselves as [was] the display of the former times of ignorance. And establish prayer and give zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. Allah intends only to remove from you the impurity [of sin], O people of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you with [extensive] purification" (Al-Ahzab, verses 32 & 33, n. d.).

Although the above verse was addressing the wives of the prophet, it includes all Muslim women, according to the interpretation of Ibn Cordoba. He stated that God ordered Muslim women to sit in their homes and not to leave them unless absolutely necessary. He explained this divine order as honouring Muslim women, since women in the pre-Islamic era mixed with men and did not wear the hijab.

In another verse God ordered Muslim men not to look at women or mingle with or talk to them, unless from behind a partition; God said, "[a]nd when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts" (Al-Ahzab, verse 53, n. d.). In addition, there are many Hadith from the prophet Mohammed emphasising gender segregation, such as addressing his companions saying, "do not enter the mosque using the females' door." In another Hadith the prophet urged the prohibition of Ikhtilat in mosques and during prayer.

It was narrated by Abu Huraira (one of the prophets' companions) that the prophet Mohammed said, "[t]he best rows for men are the first rows, and the worst ones the last ones, and the best rows for women are the last ones and the worst ones for them are the first ones." (Sahih Muslim, Book 4, Hadith 147, n. d.). The role of fathers in the lives of Saudi women is pivotal, since they live in a masculine and patriarchal society. Hence, fathers can impose their opinions on the choice of academic specialisation for their daughters. They may also prevent their daughters from studying certain subjects due to religious or social reasons such as Ikhtilat. The father may see that most of the religious evidence (whether based on the Quran or the prophet Hadith) forbids women mixing with men. Therefore, he might prohibit his daughter from going to mixed schools such as medical and nursing schools. For certain reasons, most of female students comply with the authority of their father. Firstly, this is because he is her male guardian and financially responsible for her. Secondly, she bears his name, so if she behaves in a way that violates social customs it could tarnish her father's reputation.

## **2. Women Whose Fathers Impose Restrictions With Which They Disagree Or Are Critical**

Most of the female students did not agree with their fathers on issue of Ikhtilat, as they believed that there is a misconception amongst people in Saudi society, who do not understand the true meaning of the concept of Ikhtilat. Rabab, a final year student at nursing college, does not mind studying or working in mixed places. She says: "I was not scared of training in a hospital, I was excited. Some of my friends were scared of training in a hospital because of Ikhtilat. There are some girls who used to live in a women-only society. As for me, because I often travel with my family outside Saudi Arabia I am used to dealing with men. So, the situation was very easy for me compared with my female friends."

However, some female students also stated that their fathers did not object to their decision to study a certain subject, perhaps due to the compatibility of the subject with religion or customs and traditions. According to Samirah, a students in the Department of Early Education: "My father is not that kind of father who forces their daughter to do certain things. He encouraged me to choose the field of study that I find myself in. The most important thing is I learn and be creative in my chosen specialisation. I think it's because my subject is not inconsistent with the customs and traditions in terms of Ikhtilat. For example, if I chose medicine then yes... I think my father would have refused because of Ikhtilat."

Latifa, who works as a lecturer in the Department of Computer Science, pointed out that her father did not oppose her when she decided to choose computer science, as long as it was consistent with her future role as a mother and wife: "My father did not bother too much; as with most fathers he believes that the ultimate role of a woman is to be a wife and raise children. So, he asked me to study an easy subject." Others support the choice of their daughters particularly when the subject equips her to be a good mother and wife, as illustrated by what Haneen said: "My father encouraged me to pursue my higher studies. He was happy when he knew that I chose family education. It might be because it will qualify me for marriage."

It can be said that there is a link between gender segregation and gender inequality, as gender segregation could lead to gender inequality. For example, the segregated educational system in Saudi Arabia appears to be the reason for the inequality between men and women in terms of access to certain subjects or professions. As shown by the present study, there are disciplines that are not available in female universities but available in male universities.

If Saudi male and female students study at the same university, disciplines become equally available to both. The phenomenon of gender segregation is not limited to Saudi society, and also exists in the European labour market. There are many studies that have discussed this. According to Jarman (2005), in the countries where the degree of gender segregation is high, the degree of women's disadvantage is high as well.

### 3. Fathers Open to ikhtilat

On the other hand, there are fathers where the issue of Ikhtilat causes no problems for them; rather, they encourage their daughters to study any discipline, regardless of whether it leads to mixing with men or not. As we can see from the interview with Amina, a computer science student, her father wanted her to study medicine but she chose to study computer sciences since she did not like medicine: "My father encouraged me to study medicine; he did not pay any attention to the issue of Ikhtilat. I do not think that there are parents who still think like this old thinking." What attracted my attention during the interview with Dina, a student at the College of Media, was that although her father and her brother did not want her to study media studies, they did not force her to choose another discipline, but gave her freedom of choice: "My father and brother opposed my studying at Media College. They have been trying to convince me to terminate my studies. Despite that, they never force me to study a certain subject. I tried to change their mind but I could not. They thought that I will become a TV host after my graduation."

The case of Dina shows us a different father's attitude towards media studies. Dina's father is highly educated as he holds a higher education degree. This could influence his attitude towards his daughter's education. Although he has some reservations about media studies, he did not exercise his authority over her to prevent her from studying what she likes. Instead, he left it up to her whether she chose media studies or another subject. This indicates that not all Saudi fathers interfere in the education of their daughters. There are some open-minded fathers who respect the choices of their daughters, even if such choices are against their will. Those fathers seem to hold a belief in egalitarian gender roles. Furthermore Nouf, a student in the Department of Biology addressed the unlimited support that she received from her father in terms of her choice to study medicine:

"No, the situation was unacceptable. My father very often encouraged me to achieve my dream even after he knew that I was not accepted to the College of Medicine. Then he suggested that I move to another university in another city so I could join the College of Medicine. It depends on the father; if he is conservative it will negatively affect the girl. But if he is open-minded within the boundaries of the societal customs and traditions, he will support his daughter. The role of a father is great in terms of a girl's choice of subject, since he is the backbone of life and in charge of the girl. If he approves her subject choice she will achieve her goals. However, if he says no she will have to find other alternatives." Laila, a media student who proudly spoke about her father, said: "My father was the only one who encouraged me to do media studies regardless of my mother's opposition; she thinks it does not have promising job opportunities. He is the only open-minded one in my family and he supports me whatever." As mentioned previously, some fathers forbid their daughters from joining the College of Medicine because of Ikhtilat. However, there are some Saudi fathers who encourage their daughters to study medicine, such as Amina's who mentioned:

"I initially studied dentistry for a year, and then I converted to computer sciences. I had chosen dentistry because I was thinking of the job and the future. My father influenced and supported me in studying dentistry. Then I decided to study it for my father and the job. He cried when he knew that I got accepted into Medical College. I did not want to disappoint him. I studied dentistry in spite of my knowledge of my abilities, as I do not have any experience. Although I am fully convinced that there is no difference between boys and girls in terms of capacity, the study of medicine was not my thing. I did not feel comfortable internally and there were anatomy modules that I did not like. I wanted to study computer sciences from the very beginning, but my father made me change my mind especially after he knew that I was supposed to be the first graduate from the dentistry department."

Additionally, Amani a student at the College of Pharmacology talked about her father's dream of her becoming a doctor: "My father has been encouraging me since I was a child. He used to say to me, I want you to become a doctor when you get older. This motivated me so much. It is true in the beginning I wanted to study medicine, but I found that anatomy is very intimidating .... corpses.... I felt it was difficult ....I could not handle it hence, I chose pharmacy and thank god I am relieved." Fatima, a student who studied biochemistry, highlighted how her father wanted her to study medicine but she chose biology. She said: "My father wanted me to study medicine because the specialties of all my sisters are non-scientific and I am the only one who studied a scientific specialisation at high school. But Allah did not make that happen, as I obtained low grades at high school.

I also thought deeply about medicine and I found that the years of study are so long and I will spend most of my life studying, so I did not choose it." In return, Shrooq boasted that her father is open-minded as he studied in the United States. He is the one who encouraged her to do media studies:

"My father is a columnist. He encouraged me to take media studies. My father is an open-minded person since he travelled and studied abroad. He does not like extremism. We are different from our relatives who criticise our liberal way of life." This result is consistent to some extent with Murenga et al. (2014) who found that the parents of Muslim girls in the Mumias district in Kenya positively affect their educational attainment. They revealed that although the majority of parents are illiterate, they encourage their daughters to continue their education by paying tuition fees in order to make up for what they have missed. According to the data from the questionnaire collected from the participants at each interview, the majority of fathers who encourage their daughters to study non-traditional subjects hold high academic degrees. Furthermore, some of them are open-minded in terms of women's education, since they studied abroad and experienced different cultures. Additionally, these fathers may want their daughters to be outstanding women from the rest of society, as well as to obtain degrees better than what they already hold.

#### **4. Women Self-Imposing Restrictions on Their Study Due to Concerns About Ikhtilat**

There is a group of female students who refuse to choose particular specialties, not because of their father's refusal, but because they themselves do not want to mix with men, whether during the university years or after graduation and when joining the labour market. Elham, a first year physics student described how her fear and shyness of men hampered her from studying medicine: "Since my childhood when I was at primary school I was hoping to go to medical school, but when I grew up I knew myself that I cannot deal with men. Yes, I am scared of talking to men. In our society I am not used to dealing with men as most of my dealings are done through women. My father is the only man I know. For example, if a male lecturer treated me unfairly I could not defend myself unlike a female lecturer." In this context Asma, a student studying medical physics, shed light on the psychological aspect in terms of the fear of a Saudi girl mixing with men:

"I think that mingling with men whether in college or in the workplace is difficult, especially when the society around you is only women. I think it is a new and strange situation I have never tested before. Hence, any new experience will be accompanied by fear. When someone travels for the first time he or she will feel fear and alienation and psychological fatigue. The same with Ikhtilat; it is tiring at first but then we gradually will get used to it. I personally feel the change in society and its development, and I also feel that the new generation is more positive and interactive with the community compared to previous generations." There are female students who came from traditional families and believe that Ikhtilat is religiously forbidden; according to Sarah, a final year history student: "I know one of my friends is very conservative. Her grades at high school allow her to study at medical school, but she chose to study one of the religious subjects since she does not like Ikhtilat." When I asked Najwa, a family education student, about Ikhtilat she replied with confidence: "I am against Ikhtilat as it is forbidden in our religion. I agree there is Ikhtilat in the holy mosques, but still they are places for worship and there is no time to do haram things, but other mixed places are forbidden. There is no difference between Ikhtilat and Khulwa (a man and woman meeting in a secluded place). I think that Ikhtilat could lead to Khulwa (seclusion). Thus, Ikhtilat is not permissible."

Reem, a lecturer at the Faculty of Economics and Management, spoke about her father saying:

"My father (may God have mercy on him) was one of the people who encouraged the education of girls. He was not in favour of the idea of a girl staying in the house. He always told me: you need to learn and to continue your education even if you are married. He pushed us to continue education, my sister and I. She is now a professor at a university. We are a family that value education. He, may God have mercy on him, wanted me to study medicine but I refused because hospitals are mixed places and I do not like Ikhtilat." The attitudes of some of the female students towards medicine and their unwillingness to study it because of Ikhtilat, indicates a high degree of internalisation of gender stereotypes. It appears from their responses, these female students believe that because they are women, studying medicine does not fit them. It is socially expected for Saudi women to not work two shifts in order not to conflict with their main role of taking care of their husbands, children and houses. Moreover, it is socially unacceptable for Saudi women to work late at night, as they might be subject to sexual harassment or have their reputation questioned.

In the Saudi cultural context, men are the financial providers for the family, therefore there is no need for women to work and it is better for them to stay at home. Nevertheless, this view has recently changed due to tough economic conditions. Internalised gender stereotypes appearing to influence the female students in choosing their academic subjects is strongly supported by Correll's (2001) study.

He found that the decisions of female and male students in choosing their jobs are influenced by gender expectations, which derive from cultural beliefs. He determined that male students tend to overestimate their abilities in sciences compared to female students. Hence, male students often choose to study subjects like engineering, maths and sciences, due to the social expectations that males perform better than females in these subjects. Furthermore, the results of Seymour and Hewitt's (1997) study show that women find it difficult to allow themselves to study scientific disciplines, because of gender stereotypes.

Similarly, Spencer (1999) revealed the impact of the threat of gender stereotypes on the performance of females in maths tests. He highlighted that the performance of females is low in the tests that are described as hard; however, they perform well in easy tests. There are social gender expectations of Saudi women concerning culture and traditions that could limit them in studying certain subjects. Interestingly, the internalisation of gender stereotypes is not limited to female students who study feminine subjects, but could also include those who study masculine subjects. The findings of Bonnot and Croizet (2007) reveal that the performance of female students who study male-dominated subjects like maths are affected by the endorsement of stereotypes. They also show that female students do not want to work in traditionally masculine professions.

Despite the fact that these female students are studying what are known as masculine subjects, their maths abilities are influenced by the internalisation of gender. It could be drawn from above that the internalisation of gender stereotypes may make women feel threatened, thus it prevents them from choosing stereotypically masculine subjects or jobs. This result supports the results of the present study, where some women who are studying engineering expressed the view that they would prefer to teach at a university since it is a stereotypically masculine profession. This finding could indicate that a number of Saudi women from the current generation still hold traditional gender roles. This result is contrary to Gainsky et al. (2008), who found that the views of participants have changed over three decades from believing in the traditional gender roles to believing in modern gender roles. It should be taken into account here that Gainsky et al.'s study was conducted in the United States between 1977 and 2007. Therefore, this change in gender roles could be due to the progress and development of women's rights and the equality of the sexes in the United States, where women have, to some extent, become equal to men in terms of rights. Conversely, women in Saudi Arabia are still trying hard to obtain their basic rights such as the right to freedom of movement and to drive a car. It is difficult to know if there is movement towards a change in gender stereotypes in Saudi Arabia, since there are no studies measuring the perceptions of gender roles.

On the other hand, men in South Africa are still holding on to the traditional gender stereotypes, as Kruger's (2000) study has shown. He conducted an evaluation study to examine the effectiveness of the "men as partners" program. He revealed that only 25% of the group who were not exposed to the program believe in equality between men and women, whilst around 30% see domestic violence as normal. Nevertheless, the results of the Sonke Gender Justice Survey uncovered attitudes, which are less severe towards women and their rights compared to Kruger's study. It shows that almost 50% of males are against violence towards women, and 38% of them see that the government does not use everything in its power to prevent the violence against women (United Nations report, 2009). Although the present study analyses the participants' perceptions and concludes that many of them hold internalised gender expectations, there are studies refuting the influence of the internalisation of gender stereotypes. Ziknali and Maphosa (2012) suggest that internalized gender stereotypes have not influenced the perceptions of the students at education colleges in Zimbabwe towards their female lecturers.

They found that the perceptions of the students towards their female lecturers are positive. In the same context, the results of Young's (2011) study suggest that there is no link between the level of internalisation of gender stereotypes and the leadership style of American female managers. The findings also agree with Sultana's (2010) study, which aimed to identify the gender ideology of Pakistani females towards the education of their children, as well as to identify the impact of patriarchal ideology on the gender ideology of Pakistani females. The study found that most of the participants follow the traditional ideology in terms of the role and status of women, as they believe that the primary role of women is to sustain the home and take care of the children.

Although some of my participants refused to study medicine or media studies due to Ikhtilat, there are other participants who have challenged their fathers' refusal to allow them to study certain subjects because of Ikhtilat. The divergent views of female students on the issue of Ikhtilat in this study may reflect the split amongst Saudis themselves about this issue. There is a conservative party in opposition to Ikhtilat and a liberal party who are the proponents of Ikhtilat.

According to Meijer (2010) the issue of Ikhtilat has been the scene of controversy between liberal and conservative parties in Saudi Arabia for a long time. The establishment of King Abdulla University of Science and Technology lit the fuse of the crisis again between both parties. Some clerics criticise the establishment of this university and feel it is a step towards the corruption of Saudi society. On the other hand, liberal columnists consider it a liberal symbol and attack its detractors.

### **5. Differing Views According To Whether Ikhtilatis Related To Religion Or Customs**

Regarding whether the prohibition of the mingling between men and women in Saudi society stems from Islam or from tribal customs and traditions, the female students' responses are varied. Some female students believe that Ikhtilat comes from customs and traditions, as Yasmina a lecturer in the media department reported: "In one of my lectures I mentioned that most job opportunities in the media field require Ikhtilat. After that a student told me that her father is very conservative and against Ikhtilat. Then she asked if there were women-only jobs in the media sector. From my point of view, Ikhtilat is not forbidden. It is not against religion, because the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, mingled with the female prophet's companions and talked about religious matters. There is ample evidence in this regard. For me I have no problem with Ikhtilat, provided that I cover my body except for my face and hands. However, there are some girls who refuse to stay with men in the same place. There was a media forum which took place in one of the hotels, but some female students were unable to attend because their fathers refused, as it was a mixed forum."

On the other hand Fitna, a first year psychology student, believes that Ikhtilat is prohibited in Saudi Arabia because of social traditions, not Islam. As she described: "Surely it is unpleasant for women to work or study in mixed places. My father does not allow me to work either in a hospital or private companies. But, if I work in a school he will support me since he thinks that mixing with men is shameful." Based on participants' views, gender segregation could be a social custom, since it has nothing to do with religion. Therefore, fathers encourage their daughters to work in schools, as they are gender segregated. In contrast, they deter their daughters from studying or working with men. The reason for the fathers' decisions is to ensure that their daughters work in safe places, away from the eyes of men. Saudi fathers may worry that their daughters may be exposed to sexual harassment, since there are no laws protecting women from harassment in Saudi Arabia. They also worry that their daughters might get involved in romantic relationships with men, which is socially unacceptable. Most marriages in Saudi Arabia happen through family as arranged marriages. Further, there should be no romantic relationship or even friendship between men and women before marriage. Nevertheless, Marwa an art student, clarified the role of customs and traditions, compared to the role of religion:

"Some parents do not allow their daughters to work or study in mixed places due to the fear of people talking. It is shameful for women to work with men. It is true that Ikhtilat is religiously forbidden, but honestly we care a lot more about customs and traditions than religion." Additionally, amongst the social reasons that make Saudi fathers against Ikhtilat, is social reputation. Since Saudi society is a patriarchal society, a father's reputation is related to the reputation of his daughter, wife, sister or even his mother. Accordingly, if a woman commits an act that is socially unacceptable or contravenes Saudi customs and traditions, such as talking with unrelated men, it could tarnish the reputation of the woman, thus tarnishing the reputation of her father, brothers, uncles and tribe. Thus, women's behaviour must be compatible with customs and traditions. Speaking of Ikhtilat, Samia a first year Human Resources student explained her point of view regarding Ikhtilat, saying:

"Look, I'm not with it that Ikhtilat is religiously forbidden; on the contrary, women in the time of the Prophet were working in trades and mingling with men. If a woman is respectful and committed to the Islamic teachings and the man as well, then there is no objection to Ikhtilat."

Although Eman, a biochemistry student, does not see herself qualified to delve into religious matters (since in Saudi society clerics are the ones who are authorised to interpret religion and issue fatwas), she believes that Ikhtilat is not religiously forbidden. She replied hesitantly, saying: "The forbidden nature of Ikhtilat is one of the traditions and customs ...hmmmm... I do not know; I do not like talking about religion, but I do not believe that it is religiously forbidden." Ashwaq, a lecturer in the physics department, believes that Ikhtilat is not forbidden in the Islamic religion if a woman keeps her modesty:

"Look, I feel that the issue of Ikhtilat is not prohibited nor against religion. It depends on the morality of the woman and her fear of God. Women who work in mixed places should not wear make-up or accessories to avoid drawing male attention to them." Although many Hadith suggest that women in the era of the Prophet mixed with men, some Saudi clerics follow radical interpretations of the religion or use religion in order to impose tribal customs. On the other hand, some female students believe that there is a difference between Khulwa, which is forbidden religiously, and Ikhtilat, which is permissible according to Islam. Fadyah, a medical physics student, explained in-depth the issue of Ikhtilat and touched on the difference between Khulwa and Ikhtilat saying:

"Religion does not forbid Ikhtilat as long as it is necessary. However, religion forbids Khulwa. Working-women in any area of society are committed to the Islamic uniform and headscarves. Thus, Ikhtilat is not prohibited as long as it is within limits. Many Saudi women are shy, so female doctors examine them; therefore hospitals need female employees. I think in the coming years there will be women's hospitals." Moreover Haya, a medical physics student, discussed the subject of Ikhtilat and Khulwa saying: "Ikhtilat is not prohibited but Khulwa is prohibited. For example, women eating in a restaurant, is not Ikhtilat because there are many men and women in a restaurant. This is not what Islam prohibits; Islam prohibits Khulwa where a man and woman meet in a secluded place." Conversely, Tahani believes that the prohibition of Ikhtilat is not related to customs and traditions, but is religiously forbidden:

"The reason behind the rejection of my father of my taking media studies is Ikhtilat. The prohibition of Ikhtilat stems from Islam, not from customs and traditions." Maha, a computer science student, shared the same view as Tahani, as she said: "There are religious factors that may affect the education of girls, such as Ikhtilat, whether in a school or a workplace." The divergent views of the participants on whether gender segregation comes from the Islamic religion or social customs could be due to Saudi clerics' disagreement over the prohibition of Ikhtilat. There is a debate amongst clerics in Saudi Arabia in terms of whether Ikhtilat is forbidden or permissible in Islam. There is a group of clerics represented by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia sheikh bin Baz, who believes that Ikhtilat is prohibited in Islam, citing verses from the Quran and Hadeeth the Prophet Mohammed (see Al-Missned, 1995). By contrast, there are clerics of the most famous such as Dr. Ahmed bin Qasim Al-Ghamdi, who announced in 2010 during a television interview the permissibility of Ikhtilat in Islam. His fatwa has received widespread controversy amongst Saudi society, since no cleric except him had dared to oppose the fatwa of the Grand Mufti. He refuted all the Quranic and prophetic evidence used to prohibit Ikhtilat (see Alriyadh newspaper, May 2010, Issue 15286).

## **6. Other Factors Influencing Fathers' Views/Decisions**

There are factors other than Ikhtilat that may influence a father's decision; amongst these factors are long distances and the lack of specialisation at the local university, which forces female students to study in far-away cities or sometimes travel abroad. In this case the father may refuse to allow his daughter to move to another city and live on her own, whether at university or in private accommodation, because of the shame and of people talking. According to Salma, a lecturer in the computer sciences department: "My father objected to the idea of my living on my own in Jeddah, because I am a girl. Then I began looking within available disciplines at Holy University."

Safa, a lecturer working in the Faculty of Social Sciences, spoke about her willingness to study computer sciences at Red Sea University, since this subject is unavailable at Holy University. However, her father refused to allow her for several reasons. She told me: "I got accepted by King Abdul-Aziz University, but my father rejected the idea because of transportation and accommodation. Then I had to choose Islamic studies." Lama, a lecturer in the Faculty of Science, told me about the cause of her father's rejection of her studying medicine, when she said: "My father's rejection was based on the long distances, as medicine was not available at Holy University. As I do not live in Jeddah, I travel to Jeddah every day and it is very tiring." Some female students wanted to travel abroad to study subjects, which are not available at Saudi universities.

Eman, a lecturer in a nursing school, explained her passion for aviation. She wanted to travel to Jordan to study this, however her father refused: "Initially I was hoping to study aviation and because of the lack of an aviation college for girls here in Saudi Arabia, I wanted to study it in Jordan, but my father rejected this idea. Then he asked me to study medicine here in Saudi Arabia."

### **7. The Role Of Mothers In Subject Choice (When Fathers Are Absent)**

In spite of the clear dominance of fathers in the subject choice of female students, a mother may play a role in the selection of her daughter's university specialisations and serve as a 'father' in certain cases, such as when a father is absent due to death or divorce. An example is shown through my interview with Dalal, a family education student whose father had passed away:

"The opposition of my mother to taking media studies was the main obstacle. As long as my mother said do not do it, that meant I could not do it. She also rejected my dream to be a businesswoman. She said that my father did not allow my sister to work in business because he thought that she will fail." Similarly, Sahar proclaimed that her mother's rejection of her studying medicine was because of societal customs and traditions: "I wanted to study medicine, but my mother was very reluctant as she feared people would talk. Consequently, I would become a spinster and I would not find someone to marry me because of Ikhtilat and long working hours or the night shift, that would make me stay most of the time outside the home until late at night. Thus, I choose biochemistry since it is close to medicine. Honestly, I'm not excited about my specialty and I do not like it, but in the end I want a university degree."

Hiba, an early education student whose father passed away, pointed out that her mother's refusal to let her study medicine in another city was because of the long distance: "I was accepted at a university in the south of Saudi Arabia but my mother refused to allow me, since the university was far away from where we live. She asked me how I could live there on my own. For that reason I left medicine." This finding differs from the study of Chunghee (1993), which found that the absence of a father frees girls from social restrictions and stereotypes and makes them engage in fields reserved for men. Her data revealed that the absence of the father from the family had helped to liberate Korean women from the prevailing patterns of gender, and had made them engage in areas dominated by men, such as politics. The current study found that in the absence of a father, the mother takes over his role and becomes the father and mother at the same time.

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