

Young Saudi women test feminist waters

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This week, Craig Kielburger visits Saudi Arabia.

In Saudi Arabia the sexes don't mix freely. A woman cannot travel with a man who is not her brother, father or husband. Arriving at the doors of a girls' school in Jeddah, I was asked to wait outside, blocked from entering until some of the young women inside were moved to a private room. From the empty courtyard, cleared prior to our arrival, I could see curious eyes peeking through the windows.

I was the first male ever to enter the school.

In front of me was a sight I had not seen since setting foot on Saudi soil: the smiling faces of 30 young women, their jet black hair and school uniforms plain to see. They weren't wearing veils.

This is the same country that made headlines in March 2002 when 15 girls died in a school fire after being forcibly prevented from exiting the burning building by the *mutaween* (religious police). Their crime? Improper attire. They were wearing neither *hijabs* (headscarves) nor *abayas* — the neck-to-ankle black robes that serve to hide the contours of the body.

But this day was out of the ordinary. Under normal circumstances, a male would address a class of girls or women via a television screen and teleconferencing technology. But the progressive, Saudi-, Jordan- and U.S.-educated headmistress let me speak to them in person, but only after getting the signed permission of their parents.

Our host introduced me. She explained to the young students that I was a visitor from Canada, that I was a friend, and that they could speak freely. I thanked her. She was a hero herself, a quiet activist.

Twenty-six years old, and my guide for the day, she had a pass from her father allowing her to be out with me and a male driver, since women are not allowed to drive.

Confiding in me, she told me that two years ago she had fallen in love with a Syrian man. This in itself is not revolutionary, of course, but when a Saudi woman under 30 years of age wants to marry someone who is not Saudi she has to seek consent from the highest court in the land: the king. My host's request was denied.

So they married in secret.

She also explained that Jeddah was more liberal than other parts of the country. I spoke with the class. As the discussion progressed, and when I felt they were comfortable, I asked the young women to raise their hands if they were passionate about social issues as I listed them off: poverty, child labour, environmental protection, racism

In a quiet, but strong voice, one girl said "... and women's rights!" Faster than lightning,



AP PHOTO

In Saudi Arabia, the segregation of the sexes is governed by an unwritten but stringent code.

the other girls' hands shot up.

Jaw open, then smiling, I looked to the headmistress. She nodded and encouraged them, saying, "We need to empower more women."

A few weeks later, back in Canada, a professor posed a question to my fourth-year political science class at the University of Toronto. The class was mostly women, all outspoken. The question was similar to the one raised by the young Saudi woman.

He asked: "If you consider yourself a strong feminist, raise your hand."

Not one arm moved.

Feminism has a long and proud history in Canada. Since 1916, when women in Manitoba became the first allowed to vote, there have been a string of important successes.

The Valiant Five — Emily Murphy, Irene Parlby, Louise McKinney, Henrietta Edwards and Nellie McClung — won a crucial battle in 1929 when they had the word persons redefined in the British North America Act to include women.

In our country's short history, women have won the right to vote, they've won political participation, maternity leave and more.

Many victories, but is the battle over? To an entire generation of young Canadians, 20th century battles fought and won in the name of feminism appear to be just that — battles and victories from the last century.

Many young Canadians define themselves as "socially conscious" and "poverty activists," but not too many "feminists." We need to understand the links between gender inequality, illiteracy and global poverty.

The World Bank estimates that about 1.1 billion people still live on less than \$1 a day. Seventy per cent of these are women. According to UNICEF, 65 million girls between the ages of 6 and 11 have never set foot inside a classroom.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) says a basic education of only three years makes a significant difference in women's health, family planning and income. But UNIFEM itself is highly underfunded, receiving an insufficient \$45 million to \$50 million a year. Modern-day feminism is recognizing gender-based inequalities for what they are: a global call to action. A new generation of feminists needs to raise their hands up proudly — women and men — like the brave young women we met in Saudi Arabia.

So where are today's young feminists? Are you one? Let's see a show of hands

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of Free the Children and co-authors of Me to We. With this column, they are exploring the impact of global issues on young people in developing nations and what it means to youth in the GTA.