



The Humanization of Human Rights

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Not too long ago, no one would have heard of the plight of a Saudi teenager seeking refuge from family and cultural oppression in her home country. But the power of social media made Rahaf Mohammed al Qunun's struggle into an international news story.

Junta-ruled Thailand is not known for its fidelity to human rights norms. But international public attention led Immigration Police chief Maj. Gen. Surachate Hakparn to allow Rahaf Mohammed temporary refuge in Thailand. She is one of several Saudi women who has turned to social media to publicize domestic abuse and seek international aid.

After traveling with her family to Kuwait, al Qunun broke away and boarded a flight to Thailand. Upon arriving in Bangkok, she was escorted to a hotel room and told she would be placed on a flight back to Saudi Arabia the next morning.

But a woman with the courage to flee her family and board a flight to an unfamiliar country alone for the first time was not to be deterred so easily. After barricading her hotel room door, she sent out a series of calls for help over Twitter that caught eyes around the world — she amassed over 66,000 followers within 48 hours. As a result, the Thai authorities did not force onto the Saudi-bound flight.

Perhaps most notable about this story is the absence of any appeal to traditional pre-digital channels of human rights redress. No one contacted the UN Human Rights Council or any other international agency. Instead, a desperate teenager electronically recruited an online following large enough to change the power calculus facing Thai officials, who would otherwise have routinely acquiesced to Saudi demands.

At the heart of this story is a beautiful synergy: ordinary *human beings* working together to advance *human rights* in ways that were impossible in a pre-digital era.

The oppression is real. The Associated Press reports that "Saudi females who flee their families are almost always running away from abusive male relatives, often a father or brother... In other cases, a woman's father might be barring from her marriage or forcing her into marriage. In other cases her salary is being confiscated, or she's facing sexual or physical abuse."

Al-Qunun was at even greater risk. She told the BBC that she had renounced Islam, and feared she would be killed by her family if forced to return. Renouncing Islam is punishable by death in Saudi Arabia — and a number of other Muslim nations.

Al-Qunun's story demonstrates the power of mixing the desire for liberty with the reach of new media. Another Saudi woman harnessed the power of the Internet to resist the oppressive Saudi state and equally suffocating Saudi culture. Such courageous women are shifting global attention to one of the world's most repressive regimes.

Much more remains to be done. Despite the Saudi government's recent attempts at "carwashing" to disguise the gender inequality embedded into their society, women continue to suffer. But as the saying goes, the best medicine is proving to be sunlight — and social media is the window that Saudi Arabian women are increasingly able to open to reveal to the world the gross injustices that pervade their society.

A Saudi woman speaking to the BBC World Service about al Qunun's case said "Rahaf is an inspiration. But she's not the first one who did this and definitely not the last one. What we are going through is awful. We think about this every day because us women here do not know what it feels like to go out. We don't know what freedom tastes like." She went on to say that her father kept her passport with him at all times. "Living this life is exhausting," she said.

Al Qunun was granted refuge in Canada on January 11th. In the smothering kingdom of Saudi Arabia, male guardianship laws remain in place and the supposedly reformist crown prince, who jails and even kills his critics, remains unmoved. Comments on al Qunun's Tweet announcing her flight to Canada were mixed — a number of men and women, some likely at government direction, supported Saudi Arabia's mistreatment of women.

Nevertheless, al Qunun's case is an additional sign that the balance is slowly tipping in favor of the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We should remain vigilant in doing all we can to protect global access to social media. Al-Qunun's inspiring escape provides another example of the extraordinary power of a global audience.

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