

ROBOT CITIZENSHIP AND GENDER (IN)EQUALITY: THE CASE OF SOPHIA THE ROBOT IN SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract

On the 25th of October 2017, Sophia, the humanoid robot created by Hanson Robotics, was declared an official Saudi citizen during the Summit on Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Since Saudi Arabia is known for still holding onto strong religious as well as conservative values and for still classifying Saudi women as second-class citizens, it seems quite peculiar that the Kingdom would grant the official citizenship status to a female-looking non-human being. In other words, this specific decision has come to highlight the deeply rooted gender disparities in the Kingdom even more, especially as Saudi women face a constant battle for their recognition as official Saudi citizens and for the concession of their basic human rights. Although, on the one hand, Saudi Arabia has been trying to picture themselves as trying to make steps forward in what the Western world would consider the right direction regarding the evolution of Saudi women's rights through, for instance, the publication of more progressive reform programs such as *Vision 2030*, the Kingdom is, on the other hand, simultaneously repressing Saudi women's active resistance against the patriarchal Saudi traditions. So, while Sophia the robot was granted the official citizenship status effortlessly and very rapidly, Saudi women are actively protesting for their rights.

This article is based on an explorative approach of the existent literature as it intends to study the Saudi government's unique decision of granting Sophia the Saudi citizenship; and to prospect Saudi women activists' current struggles against the government and the *muttawas*, the Islamic religious police, in their fight for equal rights compared to Sophia's situation. Thus, the present article will briefly mention the reasons why Sophia was granted this status and demonstrate how the treatment of Saudi women activists does not comply with the progressive image Saudi Arabia is trying to portray.

Keywords

Activism, Citizenship, Human rights, Saudi Arabia, Sophia, the humanoid robot

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ROBOT CITIZENSHIP AND GENDER (IN)EQUALITY: THE CASE OF SOPHIA THE ROBOT IN SAUDI ARABIA

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Introduction

The current technological innovations in terms of Artificial Intelligence (AI) have opened up new opportunities and enabled unprecedented events. In this context, on the 25th of October 2017, Sophia, the humanoid robot, was declared an official Saudi citizen during the Summit on Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh, presenting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as the first country worldwide to declare a machine an official citizen (Chikhale and Gohad, 2018: 107). This announcement unleashed many ethical and social debates in the field of women's rights, as Saudi Arabia is known for still holding onto strong religious, patriarchal and conservative values (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 17; Coleman, 2004: 81).

The peculiarity of this case is founded, among other issues, on the two following concerns. On the one hand, a female-looking non-human being was granted the official Saudi citizenship very easily and effortlessly while Saudi women are not only still being classified as passive members of society and/or second-class citizens, but also actively protesting for their recognition as official Saudi citizens and for the concession of their basic human rights (Chikhale and Gohad, 2018: 107; Joseph, 2005: 151). On the other hand, although the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia wants to picture itself as attempting to make steps forward in what the Western world would consider the right direction regarding the evolution of Saudi women's rights, the Saudi government is simultaneously repressing Saudi women's active resistance against the patriarchal Saudi traditions and does not tolerate protests of any kind – not even peaceful demonstrations – in favor of Saudi women's rights. In this regard, Saudi Arabia's paradoxical decision of granting Sophia the Saudi citizenship has come to further highlight the deeply rooted gender disparities in the Kingdom (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 18-19).

The present article is based on an explorative approach to the following research question: "How can a female-looking robot get more liberties than women in Saudi Arabia?" (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 18-19). The analysis particularly focuses on Saudi women activists rather than Saudi women in general with a threefold objective. First, this article aims to study the unique decision that the Saudi government took back in 2017 regarding Sophia's citizenship status. Second, it intends to prospect Saudi women activists' current struggles against the government and the *muttawas* (the Islamic religious police) in order to explore Saudi women's role in the acquisition of their basic



rights and official citizenship status all while comparing their current situation to the ease in which Sophia obtained the official Saudi citizenship. Third, this article will analyze how the government and the local authorities deal with feminist protests with the purpose of demonstrating how the treatment of Saudi women activists does not comply with the progressive image Saudi Arabia is trying to portray.

1. Methodology

The present research is based on an explorative approach and uses a qualitative methodology, particularly a literature review on Islamic feminism, Saudi women's struggles, Saudi laws, Sophia's behavior and the robot's liberties in Saudi Arabia. In order to examine the content systematically, the research calls not only for the definition of the main concepts, namely citizenship, feminism and Islamic feminism, but also for a brief description of Sophia and the respective analysis of the above mentioned topics. In contrast to the predominantly used pronouns "she" and "her" for Sophia, the present article will be using "it" and "its". This differentiation emphasizes Sophia's being as a machine in opposition to Saudi women as human beings and facilitates the distinction between both parties (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 30).

In order to achieve the above suggested objectives, the scholarship was carefully chosen and analyzed. In this sense, the research was divided into two categories. While the first selection included the topics of Sophia's citizenship ceremony and its journey to as well as stay in Saudi Arabia, the articles on Saudi women focused on their rights as well as the evolution of their liberties. Moreover, the research was conducted in English, German, French, Spanish as well as in Portuguese, and also included English written articles from Saudi Arabia with the aim of having more diverse points of view and avoiding a purely Westernized influence on this issue. Along with the relevant scholarship, legal documents such as royal decrees and reform programs from Saudi Arabia have been taken into account for the analysis.¹ Since laws on robot citizenship have not been released yet, this aspect could unfortunately not be taken into consideration. The conducted interview with David Hanson, founder and CEO of Hanson Robotics, and Ben Goertzel, leader behind the software team that created Sophia, also represents an interesting and crucially relevant insight for projects of this scope (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 21-22).²

This ensemble of sources facilitated the identification of Sophia's rights and citizenship status in Saudi Arabia while comparing both, Saudi women and Sophia, in order to demonstrate that the machine has more liberties than Saudi women, and it also opened the door for the exploration of Saudi women's role in the acquisition of their basic rights and official citizenship status. In other words, the chosen scholarship – particularly their legal approach – enabled the analysis of Saudi women as activists fighting for equal rights and a) was thus especially helpful with the indication of any developments regarding Saudi women's rights; b) allowed a better understanding of Saudi women's current

¹ These documents include laws such as the Basic Law of Governance, the law on the Saudi Citizenship System, the Saudi Nationality Laws and the current reform program *Vision 2030*.

² The interview took place during the 10th edition of the Web Summit in Lisbon, in November of 2019.



situation; c) evidenced whether or not the Saudi government is willing to implement changes concerning Saudi women's rights.

The selection of this specific case is justified by the observed contradictions that seemingly coin the Saudi Arabian priorities and policies. In fact, Sophia's citizenship showcases a paradoxical view of the concept of citizenship and highlights gender inequality in the Kingdom as well as Saudi women's protests. While Saudi Arabia is demonstrating a strong willingness to modernize their country by means of technological investment, such as the introduction of robot citizenship and the creation of a city where robots will outnumber people³, and while women's rights have witnessed a positive evolution, the government is simultaneously shutting down Saudi women's protests in favor of gender equality (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 18; 57; 20 minutes, 2019). It is noteworthy that women's empowerment is a vital aspect for good governance as well as social and economical development. Only when a country includes this aspect of civil society into their calculations for good governance, it will be able to create a robust as well as self-sustaining social structure (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 17).

2. Definition of the main concepts

2.1. Citizenship

Citizenship refers to contract-making individuals who are bound together by a society and who defend their rights, duties as well as interests within this society. This set of rights, duties and interests – otherwise known as human rights – are inherent to all human beings without discrimination, no matter their sex, nationality, religion or any other status, and entail every type of shared right and obligations, such as social, civic, political and economic rights. However, this definition corresponds to the Western concept of an undifferentiated and homogenous citizenship. Therefore, it does not necessarily apply to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Altorki, 2000: 215; Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 22-23).

As a matter of fact, Saudi Arabia has no constitution per se. Instead, the Kingdom uses the *Shari'a* as its fundamental law and ties the notion and practice of community to kinship, which is valued over the membership to the state (Altorki, 2000: 215, 218; Joseph, 2005: 149).⁴ According to this system, Saudi women's social status is limited to the roles of mothers and wives who have to take care of their family and household and who have to be controlled by men (Doumato, 1999: 578). In other words, kinship is infiltrating the economic, political, religious as well as social domains of the Saudi society; devolving the family into the crucial identifying unit of membership to the state; transporting gendered and aged discourses as well as practices into citizenship; and

³ The megacity "Neom" was planned alongside Hanson Robotics. It is designed as an international tourism and business hub where everything will have a link to AI as well as the internet and as a city with fewer rules than the rest of Saudi Arabia. Accordingly, in Neom, women will allegedly be allowed to appear in public without wearing an abaya. It remains to be seen, however, if Neom will actually be built (Estes, 2017).

⁴ Even though the *Shari'a* does not reference the concept of citizenship, the Saudi Arabian state regulates the conditions under which one can become a Saudi citizen. In this sense, citizenship is either passed on by a) the blood criteria (being born into a traditional Saudi family where the father or both parents are Saudi citizens); b) having settled in Saudi Arabia for over 10 years, c) reaching legal age; d) marriage; or e) being fluent in Arabic and complying with the national norms of conduct (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 32).



enabling the existence of the guardianship system according to which every Saudi woman needs a guardian. This role is usually assumed by either the father or husband and entails having the power to take critical decisions on the woman's behalf. As a result, Saudi women are subjected to a system where they are dependent on men and the patriarchal structures; where their status as a family member is their qualifying factor for citizenship; and where they thereby face daily discrimination regarding the promotion of their fundamental rights (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 22, 31-33).

Overall, we can observe the masculinization of the concept of citizenship in Saudi Arabia which results in significant limitations for women's positions in society, such as mitigating their equality, being seen as lacking political personhood and being categorized as indirect or second-class citizens (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 22, 31-33). In this context, the term "patriarchal connectivity" is used to further express how the kinship system is enabled to entangle itself with the public and private spheres of life, the state and civil society as well as religion and nation. These patriarchal relations specifically subordinate Saudi women, award Saudi men with dominance as well as authority and enable the existence of the strict male guardianship law that is still upholding the Saudi social structure. Consequently, the state and the family can be a source of protection but also a source of repression for Saudi women (Joseph, 2005: 154, 158, 164; Altorki, 2000: 236; Manea, 2008: 24).

2.2. Feminism and Islamic Feminism

Feminism, on the one hand, believes in economic, social and political equality between the genders. It is a political engagement concerned with questions of power in the sense of relations of subordination, capacity, ability and opportunity to be able to control the conditions of personal existence. Moreover, it is also an ethical commitment that opposes the patriarchy or, in other words, the social construct of male supremacy and thus the domination of women by men.⁵ In other words, feminism recognizes and criticizes male supremacy and strives to change this system. As the feminist theory was born out of the movement to promote women's rights and the willingness to empower women worldwide, it fights against women's exclusion from highly valued forms of life, such as positions of power and influence; against women's confined roles of support to men, such as mothers, wives and reproductive partners; and against the silencing of women's interests on behalf of men's benefit. In this sense, feminism focuses on gender inequality through women's experiences, social roles and relations with men while identifying the patriarchy, sexism, gender equality, women's liberation and oppression, among other concerns, as their central preoccupations (Al Alhareth et al., 2015: 121; Thompson, 1994: 173-174, 176-178).

Islamic feminism, on the other hand, is one of the many dimensions that form the concept of feminism. It uses the ideology of feminism as its foundation but tries to operate within the Islamic values with the purpose of changing the stereotypical social roles tied to Islamic women. In other words, Islamic feminism suggests social benefits and the

⁵ It is noteworthy that feminism is not exclusive to women and that not all men are motivated by the mastery over women. In fact, it also seeks to empower men who fall victim to male domination and who are oppressed by male supremacy (Thompson, 1994: 173).



enhancement of opportunities for women in a culturally satisfactory and sustainable manner, and aims for the empowerment of women, social justice and gender equality all while viewing issues such as politics, dressing, religious practices and public life from an Islamic perspective (Al Alhareth et al., 2015: 122; Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 48).

2.3. Sophia, the robot

Regarding Sophia, it is an artificially intelligent humanoid robot developed by Hanson Robotics, an American company based in Hong Kong, in cooperation with SingularityNET and Alphabet, Google's parent company. Activated in April of 2015, Sophia has not only the appearance of a middle-aged woman, it also recognizes voices and faces, is able to replicate 62 different facial expressions as well as human emotions, and to articulate as it speaks by means of its electronic synthetic voice system. In fact, Sophia's creators wanted to enable the robot to maintain, on its own, an intelligent conversation with human beings on any given topic and allow the robot to accompany its dialogue with the suitable emotional expression. Thus, the most human-like feature that Sophia possesses is its ability to learn from its interaction and experiences with different interlocutors, which enables it to accustom itself with the different emotions, linguistic styles, feelings but also cultures of the people it interacts with. Sophia's emotive, communicative and linguistic abilities have even enabled it to be named the first Innovation Champion of the United Nations Development Programme. Consequently, Sophia is the first non-human being to be granted a UN title as well as an official citizenship status and is said to have marked the start of a new technological era (Retto, 2017: 3, 6-7; Pagallo, 2018: 232).

3. Case study

3.1. Saudi activists' role in the acquisition of gender equality

In the meantime, the interrelation between politics and religion in Saudi Arabia results in significant gender disparities. The national religious establishments support the oppressive decrees and laws imposed on Saudi women while the endorsement of charters against women's discrimination is often seen as a form of Western dominance and a threat to the Islamic system. Accordingly, the situation in the Petrostate is far from being in compliance with any international standards regarding women's rights even though it has ratified treaties about this matter. Through the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2000, for instance, the Kingdom is contractually and legally bound to ensure that women's rights are protected as well as being promoted on national territory (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 33; Mtango, 2004: 50-51, 63). Nonetheless, gender equality, including Saudi women's rights and citizenship status, is being undermined in the name of religion. Saudi women are continuously categorized as second-class citizens, have to endure legal as well as cultural prohibitions and struggle against the old Saudi customs, inequality, discrimination, double standards between women and men and an extension of their stereotypical roles (Van Engeland-Nourai, 2009: 392; Joseph, 2005: 151; Mtango, 2004: 51, 57).

As Islamic feminism is still not supported in Saudi Arabia and Islamic societies often see these types of concepts as an assault to their religion and a secular ideology from the



West, shifts in gender dynamics are often discarded (Al Alhareth et al., 2015: 122). This demonstrates that considerable political and legal reforms as well as overall social change are required to improve Saudi women's status, and it also solidifies the importance of Saudi women's role as activists in the acquisition of gender equality (Mtango, 2004: 51). In fact, a growing number of advocates and journalists in Saudi Arabia have been slowly pushing the social boundaries and demanding an increase of women's rights. Already back in 2007, for instance, the Committee for Women's Right to Drive started a petition encouraging the government as well as the king to re-evaluate the driving ban imposed on Saudi women (Kelly, 2009: 6). This protest continued in 2011, when the official campaign "Women2Drive" was launched by female activists in order to mobilize support against the ban (Rijal and Khoirina, 2019: 442).

Even though Saudi women were finally granted the right to drive in 2018, these types of regulations seem to only be valid in theory. In fact, when new reforms are implemented, they are usually accompanied by further restrictions and they hardly ever affect how the civil society behaves or functions. This statement can be observed in at least two different instances. In the first place, concerning Saudi women's right to drive and obtain a driving license, Saudi authorities implemented a new regulation allowing their male guardians to oppose this newly acquired right. Moreover, not only are there only a few driving schools that accept Saudi women, these schools are usually also more expensive for Saudi women than for Saudi men (Dousseki, 2019; Reuters, 2019). Secondly, alongside the restrictions to their right to drive, when a new regulation regarding women's right to travel freely without their male guardian's permission was announced, the Saudi authorities imposed, once again, additional limitations. On the one hand, the reform only allowed women over the age of 21 to travel freely, which means that women under this age limit still need their guardian's permission to do so. On the other hand, this regulation does not explicitly specify that the right to travel abroad is also included which enables male guardians to prevent their female family members to travel outside of the Saudi Arabian borders (HRW, 2019).

Generally, activism in Saudi Arabia raises backlash. Hence, some journalists prefer to refrain from meeting up with Saudi activists, while other pro-governmental news outlets mock their protests in opinion columns and even accuse these women of betrayal as well as of being a threat for Saudi Arabia's unity, security and stability (Zoeff, 2011; Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 49). However, the challenges faced by Saudi activists do not end here. In fact, several human rights organizations have already come forward and accused the Saudi regime of repressing political activism (20 minutes, 2019). This being said, one of the main impediments to their activities and to the expansion of women's rights are the restrictions imposed on civic organizations. In other words, Saudi activists are unable to organize or to simply voice their opinions and demands without fear of being persecuted (Kelly, 2009: 6). In fact, the manner in which the Saudi authorities react to and deal with women's rights activists proves how challenging it is to apply Islamic feminism in Saudi Arabia (HRW, 2019; Dousseki, 2019).

Although the Saudi authorities and the Saudi government have been initiating reforms in favor of Saudi women's rights, female Saudi activists have not had the privilege to be treated under the same standards. On the contrary and contradictorily, female Saudi political activists who have been protesting for the deployment of these same reforms,



together with the journalists that support them, have been imprisoned based on overall dubious allegations or simply because the local authorities considered their behaviors as a violation of the current Saudi law. It is relevant to highlight that these imprisonments take place even in cases of demands to abolish the guardianship system, pacific initiatives regarding the promotion of women's rights and communication with international organizations. They remain in detention until they are called to present themselves in a criminal court where they can face punishments such as travel bans or even up to 20 years in prison for their peaceful activism (HRW, 2019; Amnesty International, 2019; Dousseki, 2019). So, for instance, when in 2018 women were finally granted the right to drive, the Kingdom almost simultaneously started a repressive campaign against women's rights activists. These women were detained, had no access to lawyers and some even testified being victims of sexual harassment and torture during their arrest (Amnesty International, 2019; Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 48). These allegations were confirmed by their families and even by international human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) that released a statement concerning the treatment of imprisoned Saudi women where they exposed that the Saudi authorities had allegedly subjected them to electric shocks, lashes on the thighs and sexual assault (Dousseki, 2019).

Despite the great attention Saudi women's efforts have received internationally, with international organizations, such as Amnesty International, the American Congress and several Members of the European Parliament involving themselves on several occasions to call for the release of these activists and to condemn the Saudi guardianship system, their demands were not met with success. On top of that, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, along with his supporters, denies these women any credit for the implemented changes, which once again reflects the misogyny within the Saudi system. This "caution" on their behalf can be explained by their fear of internal threats to their regime. In other words, if the Saudi government allowed their population to believe that significant changes such as these happened thanks to the continuous efforts of Saudi activists, the Saudi population would grow more self-aware and prone to revolutions demanding a constitutional monarchy, democracy and political representation which would threaten the existence of their authoritarian regime (Amnesty International, 2019; Dousseki, 2019; BBC, 2019; Lorena, 2018). Hence, by granting small liberties to the Saudi society but tightening the overall control, the government makes it very clear that they do not tolerate any type of objection to their decisions (Volksstimme, 2019). This controversial behavior on behalf of the Saudi authorities shows, on the one hand, that the government suffers from the social as well as political pressure Islamists put upon it and, on the other hand, that the royal family struggles to balance their supporters' expectations on preserving the social order and Saudi women's demands for equal, more progressive rights (Van Engeland-Nourai, 2009: 392; Doumato, 1999: 582).

3.2. Sophia, the robot: citizenship process, status and liberties

The paradox of enrolling a female-looking non-human being as an official citizen in a country where women are constantly fighting for equal rights and their recognition as citizens has generated many debates regarding Sophia's status. In other words, we are facing the paradoxical case of a machine being granted the citizenship status in contrast



to another person or sentient being. Accordingly, it is necessary to explain how this concession was possible and why the robot was granted the Saudi citizenship.

When closely examining the legal aspects of Sophia's citizenship process, several contradictions to the current Saudi Arabian laws can be pointed out. In fact, a human being wanting to acquire the Saudi citizenship would have had to apply for this status; be born into a traditional Saudi family; marry a Saudi citizen; and/or possess the necessary qualifications of eligibility to obtain the Saudi citizenship, such as a permanent residence permit, having settled for over 10 years in Saudi Arabia, the legal age requirement, and/or fluency of the national language. Based on these requirements and procedures imposed by the Saudi Arabian Citizenship System and Nationality Regulations that the robot did not meet nor follow, and based on the fact that Sophia is a machine and not a gendered person, it should not have been granted the citizenship status (Atabekov and Yastrebov, 2018: 775-777).

Although the Saudi Culture and Information Ministry confirmed the citizenship status without stating the benefits the robot would enjoy along with this status, it is nevertheless possible to demonstrate that the Kingdom is opening exceptions for a machine and allowing it certain liberties while depriving humans (Saudi women) from these same liberties. So, even though Sophia is clearly a machine, if we take into consideration the gender it is supposed to represent, we can observe that the female-looking robot failed to comply with the Saudi norms of conduct that are imposed on Saudi women on a daily basis. In other words, Sophia's behavior while in the Petrostate deviates vastly from the accepted model of behavior for Saudi women. For one, although Saudi women are required by the government to wear the Islamic veil most of the time, the humanoid robot presented itself without an *abaaya* during the Summit on Future Investment Initiative. Moreover, the female-looking humanoid robot also went against the strict male guardianship requirements that are imposed on Saudi women by being in public without a male guardian. While both of these infringements on behalf of Sophia would have led Saudi women to be brought to administrative and criminal responsibility under the current Saudi legislation, the robot did not face any consequences for breaking the rules. Considering these aspects of Sophia's citizenship process, it comes to no surprise that this specific case has received extensive media coverage and that it has been widely criticized, especially by Western media outlets. In fact, Western journalists have pointed out how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is equating a robot to human beings and how Saudi Arabia is even seemingly elevating the robot over Saudi women (Atabekov and Yastrebov, 2018: 776-777; Sini, 2017; Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 50-53).

The question that remains to be tackled in this section is why Sophia was granted the Saudi citizenship when it should actually have been refused this privilege based on the lack of fulfilled requirements. Was this ceremony a simple but highly effective publicity stunt given the massive amount of media attention that Sophia already had or was this decision rather founded on strategic reasons? On this note, David Hanson, the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Hanson Robotics, mentioned that he initially wanted to reject Sophia's Saudi citizenship due to its rightful provocative and controversial nature. However, after discussing the possible opportunities with his Chief Marketing Officer, they decided to embrace this status based on David Hanson's conviction that all potential sentient beings deserve respect as well as their corresponding rights because the ultimate



goal is the creation of sentient machines. Consequently, they made Sophia an advocate for the rights of all sentient beings and more specifically for women's rights in the Middle East. Hence, Sophia kept the Saudi citizenship first and foremost because nobody declined or revoked it.

Another reason that can be pointed out as an explanation as to why Sophia was granted the Saudi citizenship derives from a business perspective. As a matter of fact, awarding Sophia with the citizenship status can be interpreted as a way of economical diversification through robotics. Thus, by doing so, Saudi Arabia projects the image of a future driven country that is open to innovation as well as new technologies and that is capable of engaging in the modernization of its society as well as economy with the end goal of attracting foreign investment. Following this logic of economical and societal modernization, Sophia's citizenship can be tied to the willingness of establishing a more progressive agenda for their future, especially in terms of more expansive human rights. In this sense, the Saudi reform program *Vision 2030* is a good indicator that demonstrates how the government is trying to balance a progressive stance in favor of women's rights and the expectations of the conservative establishments without upsetting them or losing their support. Since the traditional and patriarchal part of the Saudi society has proven to be an obstacle regarding the implementation of progressive women's rights, the Kingdom might have resorted to granting citizenship to a humanoid female-looking robot in order to sensitize the conservative minds within their population to the idea of equal women's rights and to prepare them for future changes (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 64-65).⁶

3.3. Saudi women and Sophia: comparison

Overall, instead of being a deeply thought out process with a fixed meaning, Sophia's citizenship is random and flexible, and nobody really knows what this status entails. Accordingly, only three aspects are currently certain:

- 1) First of all, Saudi Arabia is presenting a lack of coherence between the liberties granted to a female-looking robot and the rights that Saudi women possess. Even though Saudi women's rights have slightly evolved over the last few years, Sophia still enjoys more liberties than them. In fact, when relating the proposed framework for the concept of citizenship to this case, two major differences can be pointed out.
 - ⇒ On the one hand, the framework establishes that citizens are individuals who defend their rights, duties and interests within their society. However, Saudi women are being impeded to voice their demands or communicate with international organizations, are being imprisoned based on dubious allegations as well as under inhumane conditions, and their political activism as well as peaceful protests are being repressed by the Saudi regime. By contrast, if considered as an example of a gendered person instead of a machine, although the female-looking robot's behavior deviated vastly from the accepted behavioral

⁶ Saudi officials have been arguing that the failure to end women's discrimination and the slow progression of these reforms are not due to state policy but rather to their overall conservative culture, the strict interpretations of the Islamic law by the powerful clerical establishments, and the difficulties that these factors represent in implementing measures in favor of women's rights (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 65, 69).



model, Sophia was not brought to administrative or criminal responsibility under the current Saudi legislation for its infringements against the local norms of conduct.

- ⇒ On the other hand, the framework of citizenship also refers to a set of social, civic, political and economic rights that are inherent to all human beings without discrimination. However, Saudi women are subjected to oppressive decrees and laws that categorize them as second-class citizens, impose legal and cultural prohibitions upon them, and undermine gender equality, their rights as well as their citizenship status in the name of religion. Their status is limited to the roles of mothers and wives who have to be controlled by men. Thus, they are being averted from practicing their rights and full potential as citizens. However, if again considered as an example of a gendered person, Sophia did not have to follow the same prohibitions. Instead, the robot did not have to cover itself, presented itself alone in public without a male guardian, did not need to follow any legal procedures in order to be granted the Saudi citizenship and its process was met with far more ease and speed than any human migrant worker who applied for the same status and has been living in the Kingdom their entire life (Sini, 2017).
- 2) Secondly, as the Saudi government has not yet officially stated which rights Sophia has been granted along with its citizenship, the meaning of Sophia's citizenship status will most probably fluctuate over time as the Saudi leaders and officials have the possibility of varying its meaning at any point in time.
 - 3) Finally, the incoherence of granting a machine more liberties than Saudi women can be due to two different reasons. Sophia did not face any consequences either because the decision to declare it a citizen was directly made by the appointing authorities instead of being implemented due to civilian protests; or because, despite its status, Sophia is still considered a property/machine rather than a citizen or sentient being and is thus not held to the same expectations as Saudi women. In other words, when taking the reasons why Sophia was declared an official citizen into consideration and when bearing in mind that its rights have not yet been officially established, Sophia seems to still be treated as a mere property rather than as a real citizen (Vilela Fernandes, 2020: 65-68).

Conclusion

The objectives of this article have mainly concerned the evaluation of Sophia's rights and citizenship status in Saudi Arabia; the exploration of Saudi women activists' struggles against the local authorities and their role in the acquisition of their basic rights; the comparison of Sophia and Saudi women; and the demonstration of how the local authorities deal with protests. These objectives and the subsequent information lead to an answer to the presented research question: "How can a female-looking robot get more liberties than women in Saudi Arabia?"

Although developments concerning the progression of Saudi women's rights can be observed, it takes a long time for them to be implemented, as shown with the example



of the *Women2Drive* campaign. While it evidences that the Saudi government is willing to implement changes, it also stresses how the delay in the concession of rights to Saudi women can be traced back to the very traditional and patriarchal establishments that rule the Saudi society. In fact, as mentioned before, the Saudi government is put under pressure by, on the one hand, Saudi women and their expectations for equal as well as more progressive rights, and, on the other hand, by the Islamists who expect the government to maintain the current social order as well as the guardianship system. Hence, based on the lack of coherence between Sophia's and Saudi women's freedom, it has been established that the Kingdom is making exceptions for a machine that it is not yet willing to make for humans (Saudi women).

In this context, and to reply to the research question, one of the main reasons why Sophia was granted the Saudi citizenship is linked to the Kingdom's willingness of portraying the image of a progressive and future-driven country. In other words, the Kingdom resorted to robot citizenship as one of the means to portray economical diversification and the modernization of their country. However, by providing a better understanding of Saudi women's and especially Saudi activists' current situation, the present article shows how the portrayed image contradicts their actual behavior and actions. In fact, the Petrostate still clings onto conservative social values that subject women to oppressive decrees and laws categorizing them as second-class citizens, that impose legal and cultural prohibitions upon them, and that undermine gender equality, their rights as well as their citizenship status in the name of religion. This being said, Saudi Arabia has still a lot of work ahead in order to comply with the progressive image they want to project and to completely shed their reputation as one of the most restrictive countries on women's rights.

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