Fleeing Oppression: Saudi Teen Granted Asylum in Canada
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FLEEING OPPRESSION: Saudi Teen Granted Asylum in Canada

Video duration – 13:36

Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun was just 18 when she barricaded herself in a Thai hotel room and started tweeting for help. The young Saudi woman claimed she was fleeing the oppression of her family and country and was seeking asylum. Her plight captured global attention on social media. Within days she was flying to Toronto after Canada agreed to take her in. Her amazing story has led other women in Saudi Arabia to speak out against social oppression, but the Saudi monarchy itself remains surprisingly quiet about the embarrassing incident. Meanwhile, Rahaf, now disowned by her family, is trying to make a new life for herself in Canada and tells her story exclusively to the CBC’s Susan Ormiston.

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VIDEO REVIEW
BEFORE VIEWING

You are about to learn about 18-year-old Rahaf Mohammed’s escape from what she described as an abusive family situation in Saudi Arabia to the safe haven of Canada. Once Rahaf arrived in Canada, she began going by the name Rahaf Mohammed instead of her full family name, Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun. Her decision to change her name is seen by many as a rejection of the guardianship system that is customary in Saudi Arabia. This societal structure requires all females to have a guardian — mostly fathers but often husbands, brothers or uncles — approve decisions regarding all aspects of their lives. This is a lifelong guardianship.

1. Why do you think it was important for Rahaf to announce her name change?

2. As a teen you also sometimes need a parent’s or guardian’s approval or permission. Do you think there is any difference between the limitations on your actions and decisions, and the limitations faced by Saudi women?
WHILE VIEWING

1. Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun was on the run from her family living in:
   ❑ a) Australia   ❑ b) Thailand   ❑ c) Saudi Arabia   ❑ d) Yemen

2. In April 2017, 24-year-old Dina Ali Lasloom of Saudi Arabia fled from her family, fearing death if she was deported back to her homeland. In the end, she:
   ❑ a) Successfully made it to Australia, where she was granted asylum.
   ❑ b) Successfully made it to Canada, where she was granted asylum.
   ❑ c) Was detained in the Philippines and remains under house arrest.
   ❑ d) Went missing after family members intercepted her boarding a flight in Manila and took her home.

3. Rahaf Mohammad got the world’s attention by barricading herself in a hotel room in Bangkok and reaching out to anyone who would help her using this social media app:
   ❑ a) Twitter   ❑ b) Facebook   ❑ c) Instagram   ❑ d) LinkedIn
4. Prior to granting Rahaf Mohammed asylum, Canada-Saudi relations were in great shape despite the Canadian government’s challenge to Saudi Arabia to improve its human rights record. ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE

5. Rahaf Mohammed’s flight from Saudi Arabia has inspired similar efforts to flee abuse. This includes a Yemeni girl seeking asylum in Turkey (#SaveBasma) and a Bahraini soccer player currently being held in Thailand (#SaveHakeem). ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE

6. Saudi Arabia’s guardianship laws:
   ❑ a) Give women the right to flee their families if they are being abused.
   ❑ b) Give men the right to expel family members from the country.
   ❑ c) Give women the right to vote and work.
   ❑ d) Give men the right to have control over the women in their family.
7. Saudi Arabia’s response to Rahaf Mohammed’s escape to Canada may have been muted by:
   ❑ a) The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.
   ❑ b) Canada’s forceful appeal for compassion.
   ❑ c) U.N. intervention.
   ❑ d) A choice to allow the teen to branch out on her own.

8. Rahaf escaped from her family via Kuwait. ❑ TRUE or ❑ FALSE
TALK PROMPTS
**TALK PROMPT #1**

Consider pausing the video and giving students the opportunity to talk to an elbow partner for a few minutes or use these questions as part of a class discussion.

Pause the video after Adrienne Arsenault signs off from her report, @ 03:11

1. What role did social media play in Rahaf Mohammed’s escape from her Saudi family? How is her story one that speaks to the power of social media?

2. How did the story of Dina Ali Lasloom serve as a cautionary tale for Rahaf Mohammed?
Pause the video after Ian Hanomansing says, “When Canada said it would [grant asylum], she jumped at the chance,” @ 07:46

1. The University of Toronto’s Aurel Braun says, “The success of this young woman in fleeing Saudi repression and finding a safe haven, this will reverberate throughout Saudi Arabia.” Why does she believe this to be the case?

2. How did Saudi Arabia respond to Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland’s tweet challenging the nation’s human rights record? How did Canada respond to Saudi Arabia’s show of diplomatic force?

3. What is your understanding of Saudi Arabia’s guardianship system?

4. How has Rahaf Mohammed’s escape to Canada provided inspiration for other Arab women?
TALK PROMPT #3

Pause the video after the last clip of Susan Ormiston’s interview with Dennis Horak, Canada’s former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, @ 12:50

1. Canadian human rights activist Yasmine Mohammed says of family life in Saudi Arabia: “The honour of the family is with the girls. So, when a young girl in the family defies her family in this way, it’s embarrassing for all of the men in the family. They’re going to be hearing such things as ‘oh, you can’t even control your own women.’” What do you think of this comment?

2. Canada’s former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Dennis Horak prefers a subtler approach to diplomacy with Saudi Arabia. Instead of calling the Saudi’s out on human rights abuses, he believes in quietly advocating for improved civil and women’s rights. “In a perfect world, that’s what I would have recommended,” says Horak. “But I understand that there are politics and politics need to be served, and politicians like photo-ops.” What do you think Horak means by this comment? What do you think of Horak’s recommended approach to dealing with the Saudis?
TALK PROMPT #3

Play the video through to the end and consider the following questions as a class –

1. What do you think of Rahaf Mohammed’s decision to leave her family?
2. What has she given up?
3. What has she gained?
4. Do you think she will live to regret her decision or will she thrive during her life in Canada?
AFTER VIEWING

Conduct online research to answer the following questions:

● What happened to Dina Ali Lasloom in 2017?

● How is her story acting as a cautionary tale for women hoping to escape the guardianship system in Saudi Arabia?
Rahaf Mohammed al-Qunun, mark my words, is going to start a revolution in Saudi Arabia. Go on social media now and watch the accounts of so many young Saudis.

– Mona Eltahawy, Egyptian-American journalist
THE STORY

The distress call went out over social media: “My name is Rahaf Mohammed. I’m 18 years old... They have my passport and tomorrow they will force me to go back... Please help me. They will kill me.”

A Saudi teen who had fled from her family was making an appeal to the world to offer her protection. Twitter was her weapon and she hoped that her message would gain momentum. It did and the #SaveRahaf hashtag got her the international attention that would save her life.

She had been planning the escape for months —she just needed an opportunity, one that wasn’t going to present itself very easily while she was living in Saudi Arabia. That opportunity came when her family decided to go on vacation to Kuwait. Early one morning, while her family was still sleeping, Rahaf made her way to the Kuwait airport and caught a plane to Thailand.
Her hope was to get to Australia where she could apply for asylum. That hope was dashed pretty much the minute she landed in Bangkok when Thai officials told her she needed to turn around and head back to Kuwait. The next flight was slated to leave a few days later so they put her up in the airport’s hotel. While in her room, she began tweeting her case to the world. A trip back to Saudi Arabia meant certain death, according to Rahaf. She had renounced Islam, an act called apostasy in the Muslim tradition, and this grave insult to the religion was punishable by death. Her situation was made worse by the fact that she had fled her family and more specifically her guardian — her father — an act of rebellion that brought shame to her family. Once Rahaf fled her family in Kuwait, her fate was sealed — she either emerged a free woman or returned home to die. This is where the story gains momentum. Sophie McNeill,
a journalist on leave from her job at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, followed the thread on Twitter and decided to catch a flight to Bangkok. Somehow, she managed to find Rahaf’s hotel room and the teen let her in. It was on McNeill’s advice that the teen barricaded the door. For the next day or so, McNeill, along with a few friends on Twitter, would be her counsel.

Among those Twitter counsellors were journalist Mona Eltahawy and Phil Robertson, the deputy director of the Asian office for Human Rights Watch. Eltahawy set to work translating Rahaf’s tweets, something that proved instrumental in seeing her Twitter following rise from a handful to over 45 000 within a day. Eventually the Twitter campaign drew enough

Shortly after the Rahaf Mohammed story began to make international headlines, Saudi Arabia dispatched its diplomat in Thailand to the airport in Bangkok. He was caught on tape saying to Thai officials, “She opened a Twitter account and her followers grew to 45 000 within one day. It would have been better if they confiscated her phone instead of her passport because Twitter changed everything.”
international attention to force the Thai government to acquiesce. They handed Rahaf over to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Meanwhile, Phil Robertson worked around the clock to spread the news of Rahaf’s plight and convince government agencies to put pressure on Thai officials to stop their plan to deport the teen back to Saudi Arabia via Kuwait. According to Robertson, Canada played a key role in influencing Thai authorities to stand down. Once Australia denied Rahaf’s bid for asylum, Canada was the first to be asked to give the young woman a home.

The UNHCR worked with Canadian immigration officials to arrange for an emergency asylum application for Rahaf and, on January 10, 2019, she began her journey to Canada. She landed in Toronto and was greeted by Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland. The next day she appeared before the media as a champion for Saudi women’s rights and a living example of the shortcomings of the Saudi guardianship system. Ostracized by her family and off to a foreign land, it will be interesting to see what the future holds for Rahaf Mohammed.

Rahaf’s father and brother flew to Thailand a few days after she fled the family in Kuwait. Since she was already under the protection of UNHCR, they never did get to speak to her.
TO CONSIDER

1. Why did Rahaf Mohammed feel it was impossible for her to return to Saudi Arabia?

2. Who helped Rahaf evade deportation and gain safe passage to Canada?

3. Why should Canada be a safe place for Rahaf to start a new life? What difficulties, if any, do you think she may encounter?
ACTIVITY: The Guardianship Laws of Saudi Arabia

A driver’s license. This is pretty much the only thing a Saudi woman can get without the permission of her guardian. That’s right: from birth until death, Saudi woman need a guardian to approve just about every significant thing they do. So, what is a guardian in Saudi Arabia?

A guardian can be a woman’s father, brother, husband, son or uncle. Guardians have tremendous influence over the women for whom they have guardianship. Read on for more information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>A guardian approves a girl’s enrollment in school. This follows her through to the end of her education, whether that entails university or college or not.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>A woman’s guardian has to grant permission for her to get married. At that point, guardianship transfers to the husband. A woman who wants to marry a non-Saudi or a non-Muslim needs to work with her guardian to get permission from the Ministry of the Interior to proceed with the marriage. It’s difficult to get permission to marry a non-Saudi and next to impossible to get permission to marry a non-Muslim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work</strong></td>
<td>A guardian is typically asked by a company if they can employ a woman. The guardian also has to grant permission for a woman to open a bank account.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Business</strong></td>
<td>In 2017, women received the right to open a business and sign a lease in their own name. That said, many Saudi landlords will not allow a woman to sign a lease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legal rights</strong></td>
<td>A woman’s testimony in court is considered half as valuable as a man’s. A woman can be arrested for “disobedience” if she does not follow the wishes of her guardian. Sisters receive half the amount of inheritance as their brothers. Up until recently, women who received a divorce from their husband would lose custody of their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Travel</strong></td>
<td>A guardian must approve travel and passport applications for women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clothing</strong></td>
<td>Women are expected to dress in clothing that fully covers their body, including their hair. Failure to dress properly can lead to detention by a division of the police force responsible for maintaining public morality. Only a guardian can pick a woman up from the police station if she is detained.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reflection Questions

1. What do you think of the guardianship system?

2. How different is the guardianship system from the social structure followed in Canada?

3. What kind of battle would the women of Saudi Arabia face if they hoped to achieve some of the rights that Canadian women have won?
Sources


