

Abstract

In 1998 when I embarked on a month long sojourn to Saudi Arabia I had only some vague feelings that one day the region would become the topic of my dissertation. In many ways this journey shaped my early perception of the Arab women which later researches and in-depth studies only reinforced.

Olyia High Street where I was staying was buzzing with activities. Along with the men delicately dressed in white robes Saudi women attracted my attention as they were a beautiful mix of tradition and modernity. Underneath the veil or the *abaya* were women dressed in western garments. This explained to me why there were so many branded stores in the Saudi capital selling western outfits. And there was another, frightening experience. One day when I was moving through the shopping malls a group of *Mutawwa* (religious police) approached me. '*Ghat, Ghat*', they demanded. They insisted that I cover my face. On subsequent journeys when I had more time for interacting with the Saudi females; visiting their homes and partaking of their kind hospitality my understanding of Saudi women deepened.

Women education in the Kingdom and in the neighboring countries had created a new breed of Arab women who appeared no inferior to their male counterparts. But an impartial survey was not possible in a system which does

not allow any formal research without prior permission from the concerned ministries. And the people I randomly met at Saudi homes or in academic and market places may not be the sole denominator of the social reality. In such a situation the only cautious approach was to rely on Arab media reports and the relevant academic research. Nevertheless, with the arrival of internet and the popularity of Blogs yet another window opened on me to see how the educated women in the GCC see, feel and sometime even act on issues of vital concern.

Our study of the GCC women began with the assumption that western observers usually miss the true nature of burqa-clad Muslim women. We made it clear at the outset that woman empowerment in the Arabian Gulf or the GCC countries was no new phenomenon. Islam had given them the right to be on her own and accepted them as complete individuals. Those who benefited most from the revolutionary and empowering message of Islam were basically the two sections of the society; the slaves and the women. In the early era of Islam we find women actively involved on the economic social and political spheres. Syeda Aaisha, the beloved wife of the Prophet Mohammed, became a role model for later day women educators and the women of *Aale Bait* became symbol of political opposition against operation and injustice. In the introductory chapter an attempt has been made to show how the ideological seeds of women empowerment have impacted the destiny of Muslim women throughout the ages. From Prophet's time down to the emergence of Muslim feminist like Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud and the traditionalist revolutionaries like Zainab Al-Ghazzali and others it is mainly the ideology of Islam that has been responsible for so diverse kinds of movements for women empowerment.

It was against this background that when we started our study of women in the GCC countries what we had to discover as a result was natural and logical. But we

live in a world where western propaganda made us believe that the burqa-clad women are an oppressed lot and that they have been denied any significant role in the society. Western parameters of educational development and progress have also made us believe that before the arrival of modern schools and urban infrastructure the GCC was a barren land without any civilization. This is also because when the UNDP or other foreign agencies talk of literacy in traditional Arab societies they do not take into account the age-old institution of kuttab found everywhere, attached to almost every mosque throughout the Arabian peninsula. Judged from the western standard the Arab men and women appear as uncivilized before the arrival of the West.

This study has been in many ways pleasantly shocking. Contrary to common perception, today the veiled women in most of the GCC countries are more educated than their co-sisters in other parts of the world. As the world media still projects the veil as symbol of oppression, it is difficult for the common people to believe that the gender scenario in GCC tells an altogether different story.

This study has shown that women empowerment lies at the heart of Islam, the official religion of the GCC countries. Impact of alien ideologies and the influence of other cultures did at times overshadow the pro-women slant of Middle-Eastern milieu but women were never completely stripped off their Islamic citizenry. During the declining days of Islamic empire however there has been a general trend to discourage women from assuming social and political role. But this was individual opinion of scholars of the time. It never changed the general Muslim perception about women who always took to the social and political responsibilities in the peninsula and beyond. However, after the discovery of oil, the entire Middle East found itself at the threshold of a new era. There was now plenty of surplus money to materialize any project. And women benefited from this opportunity more than their

male counterparts. They not only swept the schools and university campus, they also took their due share in economy and politics.

The new educational opportunities in the GCC countries, which include free education and alluring scholarships, have in fact fostered a whole new breed of Arab women who are confident to take up any challenging role. The 'new women' as they have been called, are a continuation of their traditional role models. They are new only in the sense that they have reclaimed their social role and reinvented themselves for the 21st century milieu.

The New Woman may appear admiring much of the West, the majority do not yearn to become more like their Western counterparts. While they favour gender parity, the New women of the GCC want it on their terms and within their own cultural context. While the Westerners still often see the veil as a symbol of women's inferior status in the Muslim world, to Muslims, Western women's perceived lack of modesty signals their degraded cultural status in the West. To quote Kaltham Al Ganem, a sociology professor at Qatar University: "Muslim women believe there is no need to copy the Western cultural values to have progress in their society and in their conditions. They believe they can have change on their own terms, while preserving their cultural and religious identity."¹

Women in this region do not necessarily want to change everything of their current status. On the contrary, they want to progress in society while preserving their traditional roles in the family and society. True, the New Women have their ambitions and aspirations, but for them their fulfillment does not mean to break away from their traditional role.

¹ Barbara Bibbo, Muslim women seek freedom 'within their cultural context', Gulf News, April 12, 2008

Each country that we studied at length, we found that the social and political roles that women have reclaimed in recent years, have not destabilized the traditional religious mode of the society. Yes there are some tremors and some murmuring oppositions but they are quite natural reaction of the sections of the society that feel affected by new role of women. This is because when women reclaim their role they have a precedent in history of Islam and hence not violating the basic values of the society.

Today throughout the GCC more and more Arab women are in leadership positions. Except in Saudi Arabia where women have recently been inducted as advisors to the *Majlise Shura*, the political role of women have been widely accepted by the people and the establishment. Although in a non-democratic setup these appointments can be seen as tokenism, nevertheless, the very fact that some women are given such important portfolios at least speak of the fact that accepting women in such roles is very much part of male psyche in the GCC countries. Businesswomen are often from privileged backgrounds and rise through family businesses. But their emergence reflects a broader trend of growing participation by women in the formal economy. And there are more than this symbolic presence in higher echelons of the society. There are women Ambassadors, women CEOs, women officials, women professors, women engineers, women run e-businesses and financial institutions.

In fact the GCC women have come a long way. Today they are playing an increasing role in the development of their societies. They are showing marked presence in the private and public sectors of the economy while maintaining their traditional roles as homemakers. Every day we read in the Arab press news of important breakthroughs about Arab women's development and their increased participation in private and public life.

For all those addicted to the Western media reportage of secluded women in the GCC, the fact below might be astonishing:

- There are four women ministers in the UAE and another four in Oman. Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain, each country boasts two women ministers.
- Laws and degrees are being passed to grant women more equal rights to participate in local councils, in consultative councils, in municipality councils in many Arab countries notably in the Gulf States of Qatar and Oman as well as in Bahrain, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, where three women have been appointed as advisors to the Shura Council.
- Women are heading Diplomatic missions as Ambassadors in countries such as Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait.
- The Arab parliamentarians have declared 1st February of every year as Arab women's day in acknowledgement of women's role in Arab society.
- Women in business in the Arab world are increasing in numbers and influence. They are setting up local businesswomen's associations in their countries. A Council for Arab Business Women has been set up under the umbrella of the League of Arab States in 1999, with the objective of strengthening the role of Arab businesswomen in their local economies as well as in the Arab Common Market as a whole.
- Women in the GCC have an estimated \$40 billion of personal wealth at their disposal. Most tellingly, in the Arab world overall, 70 percent of university graduates in 2007 were female.²

In the preceding chapters we have shown that the women issue has been at the center-stage in the GCC countries since the reorganization of the region as specific

² Quoted by Haifa Fahoum Al Kaylani, in "Women are Agents of Change", Common Ground News Service, March 4, 2008. available at: <http://www.worldpress.org/Mideast/3085.cfm>

gulf identity. The oil money has in fact catalyzed the process of development. What other countries could achieve in 100 years or more the GCC women have done it in a relatively shorter span of time. The overall pace of change and development was fast and women took extra advantage of the changing world around them. A brief highlight of the gender situation in counties under study should suffice here.

Bahrain

Bahrain can be proud and boast of having the lone and the first elected woman Member of Parliament namely Latifa al-Qa'oud in the Gulf region. As per available data of 2004, women share in senior civil service was 9 percent while they constituted 11 percent in the private sector. The 2006 data shows that they make 42 percent of the government workforce.

There are no doubts some serious efforts for women empowerment as we see the increasing graph of women participation in all walks of life. But the establishment also involves and probably believes in tokenism. For example, when we hear them saying that the second Bahrain woman has been appointed to the post of ambassador in 2007, or a first Bahraini woman rose to the presidency of Bahraini Bar Society, or another woman appointed as the first woman judge in 2007, or a member of the constitutional court in 2007, or another rising to the presidency of UN General Assembly in 2006, or being elected to be the first woman MP in Gulf, or joining the national airline as a pilot (2006), or having the honour of second women minister (2005) in Bahrain, these glossy facts may not necessarily reflect the true picture of the general lot of women in the country where opposition is suppressed and the state orchestrated Supreme Council of Women is seen by many as yet another move to block independent women activism.

Yet women participation at higher level, be it a result of tokenism or an attempt to control state apparatus through proxy, has a psychological impact on the women

psyche. The appointment of a woman as president of the university in 2003, or entrusting a woman Nada Hafez the portfolio of health ministry or appointing Dr Fatima Balooshi in 2005 as minister for Social Affairs or appointing two Bahraini women to the Supreme council of the Gulf Cooperation Council, should be seen in this perspective.

Kuwait

Women empowerment in Kuwait basically owes to the establishment of Kuwait University in 1966 which open avenues of higher education on both men and women. During the 1970s, the reality of women pursuing undergraduate courses led to a perceptible attitudinal change, correlating the image of educated women as symbols of modernization of the Kuwaiti community, so much so that the first women graduates who came out to work were respected and treated as quasi-celebrities.

Put simply, armed with education, training and professional degrees, women have virtually swept all sectors of the economy, often occupying parallel and senior positions, and actively participating in the decision-making process as important members and citizens of the Kuwaiti society. Today, their presence in the diverse sectors of the economy is compellingly profound with as many as 34% of the women occupying various cadres in the national labor force, ranging from professional, managerial, technical, and services sectors, and their number is steadily growing. Given this reality, the day is not far when women will supersede and turn the gender tide dramatically in their favor through their persistently higher educational attainments, academic excellence and professional endowments. A broad indication of this trend is profoundly apparent throughout the educational system, where statistics exhibit that women are continuing to dominate and exceed at all levels of the educational process.

Kuwaiti women have enjoyed many economic and social rights, and even some political rights in the past, but suffrage and candidacy for office remained restricted to men for several decades. During its nascent years, the state offered women several fields of education, including engineering and political science, which had been limited to men in other Gulf countries. Similarly, women were permitted to hold many diplomatic positions. Nabila al-Mulla, for example, who headed the permanent Kuwaiti delegation to the United Nations, was the first female ambassador from the Gulf region.

Women held many other positions as well, including posts as university presidents, ministry representatives, and editors-in-chief of principal newspapers in Kuwait. Nor were Kuwaiti women absent from Kuwaiti election campaigns, as they supported many candidates – especially those who called for the affirmation of women’s political rights.

Although elite women are visible in a number of public arenas and their views on a variety of issues are published in the press but they are not truly representative of the common woman. True, the president of Kuwait University is a woman, a vice-president of the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation is a woman and other elite women also hold powerful positions in government agencies. Yet, as Mary and al-Mughni rightly argue: “...the privileges of elite women do not trickle down to other Kuwaiti women.”

Qatar

In Qatar, Sheikha Mouza, the wife of the Emir, has eventually emerged as the symbol of woman empowerment. She has brought prominence to the role of Qatari women and created an environment that encourages them to meet their social obligations and participate in public life. H.H. Sheikha Mouza endorses women's

conferences, which discuss women's issues and recommend solutions for the problems and challenges that confront women who work outside the home.

It is noteworthy that now women hold leadership posts in many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the posts of Chair of the Board of Directors of the Social Development Centre, the Qatari Red Crescent Society, the Qatari Centre for Voluntary Work, the Family Consultation Centre and the Mothers' and Children's Cultural Centre.

The president of the University of Qatar and the dean of the Faculty of Shari'a Law and Islamic Studies are also women. Women have the right to participate in local politics, and a number have run for local office. While there is no national parliament, the new constitution calls for a consultative Shura Council, with two-thirds of the membership to be elected.

Statistics show that the number of Qatari female students in the State-run schools for the current academic year has risen at greater rates than the number of male students. Working women also represent more than 50% of the total workforce at the Ministry of Education. Working women at Qatar University either as staff members or administrative personnel account for more than 50% of the total workforce of the University.

The Qatari women started to make a stronger presence in this field especially after graduating from the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. The number of Qatari females working in national and foreign banks reached 205. Banks support the Qatarization policy and provide work opportunities especially for the youths.

Some Qatari female graduates specializing in history, archeology and museum management took on the role of tourist guides. They took over the duty of

explaining archeological remains and tourist attractions in Qatar and giving detailed account on the archeological acquisitions of the museum. A number of Qatari girls have joined the workforce of Doha hotels too, in a growing tendency led by Qatar National Hotels Company to encourage the Qatari youths to venture into this field and increase job opportunities for women.

In short, the women march in Qatar's socio-political has been impressive and promising. Not long before, in 1986 the Qatari women represented only 10.5 per cent of the total workforce. But now they constitute 30.3 per cent of the national workforce according to a 2004 account. However, many educated women do not join the labour market, because of family opposition and household responsibilities. And also for many women, working does not represent an economic necessity and is not perceived as a tool for personal fulfillment.

To conclude, woman empowerment in Qatar would not have come about if it were not for the political will of decision-makers and the greater role the First Lady has played in championing women's rights.

Oman

In a regional comparison, women in Oman are indeed in a good position. According to official data, they have a third of the positions in the public sector and occupy twelve percent of government leadership positions. There are four female ministers and two female ambassadors; a few women also sit in the steering committee of the chamber of commerce as well as in the State Council, whose members are appointed by decree.

For more than a decade girls have topped the merit list in the country's secondary schools and this domination has now spread to the degree courses offered by Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat. The girls are consistently coming out on

top and, with a declared government policy guaranteeing Omani women equal rights in both education and employment, as enshrined in the Personal Status Laws (PSL), the sky is the limit for these ambitious young women who are grasping the available opportunities with both hands.

Oman is rightly proud to have been the first Arab country to appoint a woman as its overseas ambassador. And mention has already been made of the four women ministers earlier. In Oman it is immediately evident to any visitor that while women often pursue the freedom to dress as they wish by choosing to wear modest attire, their potential and ambitions are far from suppressed.

Women are involved in all areas of life, working as doctors, dentists, teachers, bankers and entrepreneurs, as well as maintaining their vital role as homemakers. Their progress is reflected not only in the number in employment but in the increasingly high positions they are taking up in both the private and public sectors. There are no official figures available but all indicators point that Oman has the highest number of working women among the six GCC states.

In a nutshell, Omani women are not clustered in one area of interest – domestic – as many would like to believe. They are in businesses, banking, in the medical field as both physicians and nurses, and at all levels in government offices. It is amazing that, although Oman was the last of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to inaugurate universal education, its young women already are in the forefront of those countries both in achieving gender equality in the workplace and in assuming full responsibility for the affairs of their country.

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

UAE development planners realized as early as in 1971 that without the participation of 50 percent of its citizenry, the UAE will remain helplessly

dependent on expatriate labor force. The major initiative in this direction was taken by opening its women university in 1977, with separate facilities for men and women that laid the foundation for future women.

Educational opportunities, the real indicator of women empowerment and development, are now open to women at all levels in the UAE. As indicated by the statistics cited, women in the UAE have commonly embraced the formal educational opportunities made available to them since the foundation of the state. Female students are now in the majority at all levels of higher education in the country. Women are also achieving impressive records in their studies, outperforming their male counterparts in many activities. The vast majority (80 percent) of these young women are first-generation college students.

In the UAE's small-to-medium enterprise sector, women comprised 50 per cent of the businesses. On the labour front, the Middle Eastern female labour force grew by 5.2 per cent from 2000 to 2005, compared with 4.7 per cent during the 1990s. Women's workplace participation in the UAE also soared from 9.6 per cent in 1986 to over 33.4 per cent now. What these figures indicate is that the GCC region, as a whole, is currently witnessing one of the world's fastest growth rates in terms of developing human capital. To quote Lubna Al-Qasbi, the first woman minister of the UAE: "Gone are the days when women's role is limited to the home. With world-class education facilities right at our doorsteps, as well as increased political representation, there is now a greater understanding and acceptance of the needs and rights of women in the Arab World." Lubna herself has emerged as the success story of Emarati women who figures among 100 most powerful women in the US-based Forbes Magazine list.

Today, over 65 percent of the total university graduates are women and they also constitute 22.5 percent of the total members of the parliament and hold four

important portfolios in the Federal government. Then, there are over 12000 members in the Business Women's Council in UAE and their total investment is valued at Dhs.10 billion.

Even judicial and oil sector have recently been opened for women. Pioneering modernization in the judicial sector, the Department of Judiciary-Abu Dhabi has recently appointed two women as public prosecutors, the first women in the UAE to be hired to this position.

The traditionally male-dominated oil industry in the UAE has recently undergone the biggest transformation in its history - the introduction of female Emiratis. Oil companies have signed agreements with the 219 women undergoing training at the Petroleum Institute (PI), Abu Dhabi, to work in the industry after graduation. As the price of oil has gone up, so too has demand for engineers and the salaries offered.

From the pearling and fishing economy to the emergence of a modern sophisticated economic base, women have played a very significant role. It was mainly because of the educational infrastructure and women only school that went hand in hand with the local traditions and customs. Nevertheless, the UAE women have displayed extraordinary talent as they outshined their male counterparts on the university campuses. Given the situation of women participation just 20 years ago, one really wonders how all happened at such a quick pace and so smoothly, without causing any social or political unrest. Today, UAE women can be compared with their sisters in any parts of the developed world.

Saudi Arabia

Despite all the odds, like their UAE sisters, the Saudi women too, are setting sky as their limit. That is exactly what Hanadi Hindi, a young Saudi woman has

symbolically displayed very recently. She was appointed as Saudi Arabia's first female pilot.

Saudi women have now started to challenge the norms, though cautiously. They are, for instance, keen for King Abdullah to introduce a new Cabinet portfolio — a minister for women's affairs — thus paving the way for the first female cabinet minister to be appointed in the Kingdom. This they stress is essential so that Saudi women have the right channels to exercise influence. They look perhaps enviously to their cousins in the rest of the GCC countries, all of which have appointed female ministers in various portfolios. They also want women's participation in the Shura and other councils of state; this seems to be on the cards.

Princess Adelah bint Abdullah, the daughter of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah, much like Marina Mohamed and Nori Abdullah, the daughters of former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohammed and Abdullah Badawi, is giving his father “an earful” regarding the rights and empowerment of Muslim women. Perhaps the reforms which Saudi Arabia has instituted in the last year or so regarding the greater role of women in Saudi society and economy may indeed have had some influence from Princess Adelah.

But, women such as Lubna Al-Olayan, CEO of Olayan Financial Services; Samra Al-Kuwaiz, managing director of Osool Brokerage Company (Women's Division); Nabila Tunisi, acting manager, projects department at Saudi Aramco, and Soha Aboul Farag, a banker with 17 years of experience who last year was chosen for the “International Women Leaders Mentoring Partnership” in the US, are the pioneers for the new and future generations of Saudi women. As professional women in high-powered jobs, they have successfully managed to carve out careers as working mothers while at the same time managing their families and dispelling the

oft-quoted stereotype of Saudi women — of a meek, compliant and oppressed section of society.

Women, for instance, have stood for — and won — elections to chambers of commerce in the Kingdom's major cities; and they have been promised participation in municipal elections next time round. The bad news is that there is still a long way to go in terms of social and legal reforms for Saudi women to attain their rightful and equal status in Saudi society. Nevertheless, the economic power of women in the Kingdom cannot be understated. Women own 10 percent of real estate, especially in major cities such as Jeddah and Riyadh, and 30 percent of brokerage accounts in the Kingdom. They own some 40 percent of the family-run companies, very often as silent partners. Saudi women as a whole own estimated cash funds of SR45 billion, of which 75 percent is sitting idle in bank deposits.

According to a recent study by the Khadija bint Khuwailid Businesswomen's Center at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce & Industry (JCCI), investment by Saudi businesswomen has reached some SR8 billion, which is around 21 percent of the total investment. Women "own" some 1,500 companies — about 4 percent of the total registered businesses in the Kingdom. There are 5,500 commercial registrations of women's projects, representing 20 percent of businesses in the retail, contracting, wholesale and transferable industries sectors.

The business case for the greater and equal involvement of women in the Saudi economy is proven. Saudi women tend to outperform Saudi men in education; the arts; science; and if they are given the chance in business and industry they might do so here as well. Today, the Kingdom is witnessing a boom which is even bigger than in the 1970s after the first oil price rise and women's wholehearted participation in this process can double the results.

Saudi women are now part of any major national discourse. In September 2003, 306 Saudis, including 55 women, signed a petition entitled "In Defense of the Country" that was later presented to Crown Prince Abdullah. In a bid to reinforce women's demands, a group of 300 Saudi women, including academics, intellectuals and simple employees drawn from regions across the Kingdom, presented a petition on December 2003 to Crown Prince Abdulla mainly to "recognize women as eligible, without the need to have the escort of the legal guardian (such as a father, husband or brother), to be present in case a trade registration record is needed for a woman to start business."

Broadly speaking, there are positive developments for Saudi women both at the government level as well as the personal level. However, the truth remains that women's political, social and economic conditions in Saudi Arabia are mainly governed by the local customs as well as the political demands of the family rule of the Al-Saud dynasty.

The Emergence of the New GCC Woman

This study has made at least one thing clear; that the western stereotype of the Middle-Eastern woman is now a worn out concept. The new educational infrastructure in the region and the arrival of prestigious western universities right in their courtyard as also the active cooperation of girls colleges like Iffat College in Jeddah with reputed universities in the US has created a whole new breed of Middle-Eastern women. And if we believe the data, today, the female participation in education in some of the GCC countries, surpasses even the United States. The figures are astonishing.

According to a UNESCO data, and contrary to Media image which depicts them as an oppressed and illiterate lot, today women in the GCC have gone far ahead of their Western Sisters in Science Education. Muslim women in science have

become leaders in their fields, receiving awards, earning patents, and yet in the western media these women get no projection as they do not exist.

The fact is that the United States falls behind some GCC countries in the percentage of women graduating in science to the total science graduate population. The countries whose ratio of women science graduates exceeds that of the United States are Bahrain and Qatar. The data for years 2002/2003 contained in these tables describes the percentage of women graduates in science and engineering out of the total science and engineering graduate population in respective countries:

Woman Graduates in Science

Bahrain 74%

Qatar 71%

Compared with...

U.S. 43%

Japan 25%

(Statistics from the "Global Education Digest" report released from UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2005)

Despite the fact that the Muslim Women share a single faith, even the GCC Muslim Women are no monolithic unit. While in Kuwait and the UAE women enjoy more political and social role, Saudi Arabia still debates on the participation of women in politics and is hesitant to accord the woman right to drive.

There are also a few paradoxes that, at first, seem baffling. Despite the fact that job avenues are available to women in most of these countries, women do not feel enthusiastic about jobs. It is partly because of cultural norms and partly due to better economic conditions where one breadwinner suffices the entire family unit. The same is true about the Saudi women who though feel cultural prohibition for driving but at the same time enjoy the facility of a chauffeur driven car and do not want to forsake it for freedom to drive.