

New Horizons for Saudi Arabian Women

Studies about Saudi Arabian women are very scarce if they are not totally inexistent. Rumors say that complete segregation between the sexes is required, female illiteracy is very high, early marriage is the rule, opportunities for work are closed to women.

Ms. Salha Abdin, in an article published in the Arabic edition of the magazine "People" (An-Nas), vol. 9, no. 1, 1982, tries to clarify the picture offered by public opinion and to present certain facts about women in Saudi Arabia.

In order to understand social conditions in that country, she says, we should remember that it is the birthplace of Islam, that Moslems everywhere look up to it as a source of religious and spiritual guidance and, lately, because of its oil reserves, as a source of financial aid. Unlike many other Moslem countries, Saudi Arabia tries to cling to the original Moslem civic and penal laws in their integral form and to follow a slow pace in taking any evolutionary steps.

There are in Saudi Arabia more than a million foreign residents while the native population is evaluated at 7 million. Foreign influence is sure to spread and the government has to watch and regulate that tide in order to prevent any harmful effects that might result from it.

Marriage

The government policy encourages marriage with the aim of increasing the population. The signing of the marriage contract allows the betrothed to visit and get acquainted with each other. If, during the period of betrothal, disagreements between them arise to show that their life together would be impossible, they may separate without consummating the marriage.

Payment of the Mahr, or brideprice, is obligatory for the bridegroom. Lately, the exorbitant sums required by the bride's parents have deterred young men from marriage. The government has been working out a national plan for reducing the rate of the Mahr and providing needy candidates with money; not only for paying the brideprice, but also for the wedding and house furnishing expenses.

Sexual Segregation

Sexual segregation is observed in Saudi Arabia as a religiously ordained principle. It is applied in schools and universities, in business circles, and in all public places. Women may go out for work or prayer provided they are veiled. At school they are segregated as soon as they reach the secondary stage.

Women's Education

The government's policy, as declared in 1970, stated that the aim of women's education is to prepare

them to be good wives, mothers, and successful housekeepers. However, they could be encouraged to practice certain occupations that agree with their nature such as teaching, nursing and medicine.

The first school in Saudi Arabia was opened in 1936, the first institute for higher education in 1949-50. Only boys were admitted to those schools.

In 1959, girls' schools were started under the supervision of a committee responsible to the Mufti (professional jurist of the Kingdom).

The demand for girls' education was great. Between 1960 and 1980, the percentage of female students rose from 8% to 55%. Higher education for women is available in two universities which have annexes in several cities of Arabia. There is also adult education for women, normal training institutes, weaving centers, and schools for handicapped women.

Education is not compulsory but it is free for all students at all levels. Public or governmental schools receive 94% of the students. Sixteen percent of the public budget is allotted to education.

Women students who go to study abroad through government help must be accompanied by a male relative, a brother, or a husband.

Women and Work

Women's work outside the home is still at its elementary stage. The large demand for it obliges employers and government people to employ foreign women in administrative, medical, educational, and other responsible positions. Every year about 800 women graduates from the various women's colleges in the country are readily employed in responsible posts where their work is accompanied by the necessary training. Banking has recently been admitted as a new occupation for women. Women's banks, administered by women specialists in economics and accounting, have been created in Jedda, Riyadh and soon in other towns of the kingdom.

There are no public libraries for women. Educational centers and women's associations are trying to make general culture accessible to women through audio-visual methods and televised lectures borrowed from men's colleges. Further knowledge is more available to them in the traditional fields of administration, secretarial or office management and medicine.

Health Improvement

The government's interest in health improvement aims primarily at an increase in the population and in the labor force.

While the birthrate is estimated at 50 per thousand each year, and the rate of general mortality attains 20 per thousand, the rate of child mortality reaches 152 per thousand, a very high proportion indeed.

In rural areas, most deliveries take place in homes and are administered by traditional midwives. However, recent information given by the Ministry of Health shows a certain rise in the number of deliveries performed at hospitals. Between 1973 and 1977 the number of hospital deliveries was doubled and the proportion of child and prenatal mortality was reduced by more than half.

Abortion is allowed only through medical advice when it is a means of saving the mother's life. Sterilization of women is not forbidden though the demand for it is very low.

Family Planning

No statistics are available regarding average fertility but it is supposed to be quite high among Saudi women. So far no governmental plans have been made regarding birth control and family-planning. Considering the high mortality rate of children and the ill-health of mothers often caused by successive, unspaced births, such a step seems necessary. In spite of the large sums spent on health care facilities for mothers and children, no family planning service has been established. Cooperatives and women's associations do not show any activity in this respect.

The government forbids the importation of contraceptive devices, probably out of fear that the free distribution of such devices might encourage immoral conduct. On the other hand, contraceptive pills prescribed by doctors are easily and freely obtainable by married couples. The popularity and extensive use of the pill might provide a ready ground for its being officially admitted.

Recently, two positive steps have been taken toward the improvement of children's health. The first is compulsory vaccination of children before they are admitted to school. The second is the encouragement of breast-feeding by government authorities.

Women's Associations

Public participation in national development is reflected in the growing number of women's organizations involved in voluntary welfare activities.

In Jeddah, the first women's association created in that city concentrates its efforts on general services to women. It has organized for working women a number of facilities such as day care centers and nursery schools; for adult women, courses in typing, weaving, languages, manual work. Talks and lectures are offered on religious topics, nutrition, and child care. The budget of the association is about two million dollars, mostly contributed by the government. There are now, in various parts of the country, ten women's voluntary associations which have just started their activity and which await further consciousness on the part of their members in order to become full-fledged contributors.

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