

The Women of the United Arab Emirates

by Linda Usra Soffan

Published by Croom Helm, London in 1980 and in the USA in 1980 by Harper and Row Publishers. 104 pages and glossary, appendices at the end.

Linda Usra Soffan grew up in a first generation Muslim Arab family in the United States. Through her personal experiences and through her readings she was motivated to undertake a research on Arab women in the Gulf region especially. She hopes that any information which adds to the existing body of literature on Arab women will help to have a more realistic and objective image of women in the Arab world. This she considers a service to the Western world in dispelling many myths surrounding in particular the special group of women in the Emirates.

In her study, Linda Soffan examines the factors which have influenced and continue to affect the position held by women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) today. A basic premise that she holds in her book is that Islamic law has granted women rights and privileges in the spheres of family life, marriage, education and economic pursuits — rights which aim at improving their status in society in general. The author claims that it is through the misinterpretations of various religious scholars influenced by a number of local traditions and social trends that women have not been given their rights. In her study the writer tries to examine to what extent UAE society has moved away from strict adherence to Koranic religious rules and has allowed local traditions regarding women to take precedence over Islamic law.

Lack of research on this subject has led the author to obtain her information through interviews with various local officials and important private citizens throughout the seven states of the Emirates. In addition, she has devised a standardized set of questions with a wide range of issues! The results from this questionnaire provided the basis for an examination of the role and status of women as they are related to religious, social and economic factors.

In the chapter on Islamic law regarding women the author asserts that inequality of sexes, the inferiority of women, and their low position in society are not due to Islam but rather to the difficulty of incorporating radical ideas on women into tribal customs. She admits the fact that with modernization, tribal practices and customs have begun to break down in the Arabian Gulf. The basic social structure has changed. Extended families have become small, nuclear families; opportunities for formal education have been given to women for the first time; employment opportunities in the labor market in a variety of occupations have been granted. A new awareness has come to women through new systems of communication (i.e. television, radio, newspapers and modern forms of transportation).

In the chapter on "Marriage and Family Life in the

UAE", the author discusses the fundamental changes that are taking root, beginning with equal educational and social advantages for women. As women assume roles outside the family and contribute to the building of their society, so their position within the family is elevated. More and more daughters are less willing to accept whatever marital mate is chosen by their parents. A marriage based on their own consent is apt to give them more stability. An improvement in their status and functions as wives and mothers is inevitable, and incompatibility in the marriage and problems in the family unit will occur less frequently.

In the chapter on "The Role of Education", the author discusses the improvement brought about in the lives of women through the introduction of education for girls. She gives credit to the efforts of Shaykh Zayid, President of the Union and ruler of the wealthiest state, and his wife Shaykha Fatima who have encouraged the rapid spread of education and generously provided funds for any student willing and able to study abroad. The building of a local university has helped women to receive higher education. It is the writer's hope that educated women will apply their knowledge to the building up of UAE society.

In the chapter on "The Role of Women in the UAE Economy", the author discusses the economic independence traditionally enjoyed by women of this area. She traces the origins of this salutary practice to two very strong tribal traditions as well as Islamic laws observed in the UAE: the right of women to inheritance and the right of women to control their own earnings. In spite of this relatively good economic situation of women in Muslim societies, many middle-class females desire to work. When UAE women were questioned concerning their willingness to work, assuming they were in a situation where they would never be wanting for money, the most common response was that a woman works to gain status and a sense of self-worth and not for economic reasons. Most UAE working women are concentrated in the so-called 'feminine' occupations relating to education, health and social planning. There is hope, however, that women will begin to be more visible in other professional fields. Prospects for higher levels of participation in the labor force are clear, even though women's levels of participation in the labor force are still very low. One important point is that neither religion nor government keep women from becoming economically active.

In her conclusion, the author states that the UAE woman has held a relatively high status in her roles as a family person, an educated person and an economically active person, primarily because of strict adherence to Qur'anic law and traditions. She expects that because of this higher status, UAE women will have a

less difficult time in further strengthening their position in society than other Arab women have. She adds that much credit goes to local leaders for their support of women's rights.

The book has several appendices at the end including suras from the Qur'an relating to women, educational statistics on total enrollment of male and female UAE students and their specialization. Also a table showing employment of women in government ministries.

"The Women of the United Arab Emirates" certainly enlightens the reader on the present status of women in the Emirates. The main theme of the study runs through all the chapters, giving sufficient detail to convince the reader that it is not Islamic law that has kept women behind in these Emirates. On the contrary, when strictly applied, it has helped them in their advancement. The author tries to dispel the myth that Islam is a religion that hinders the progress of women in modern times.

As the author confesses, she hasn't had the opportunity to draw her data from research findings, as there has not been any research conducted on the women in the Emirates. This is the reason why there is a subjective approach to the data collected from questionnaires and interviews. This is a more expository essay on the Arab women in the Emirates than a detailed analysis of research findings. It has passages that are rhetorical, written with vehemence and conviction. They serve a purpose, however, in creating interest in the status of women in the UAE.

Azadouhi Kalaidjian (Simonian)

United Nations' International Activities

1. Day of Peace

The third Tuesday of September of every year has been set aside by the UNO to be observed by the world's peoples as a "Day of Peace".

2. A University for Peace

The University for Peace has been recently founded in Costa Rica under the auspices of the U.N. General Assembly. The first members of the University Council were inaugurated in March 1982. The Council will eventually have 25 members representing the five world areas and various U.N. organizations.

(**Peace and Freedom**, vol. 42
no. 9, Dec. 1982, p. 15)

3. 1983, World Communications Year

On Nov. 19, 1981 the UN General Assembly

proclaimed the year 1983 World Communications Year, (WCY). The UN resolution A/36/40 states that the purpose of the year is "Development of Communications Infrastructures". In order to ensure the harmonious development of these infrastructures by effective coordination at the national level National Coordination Committees for WCY will be set up in member states. They will represent the following sectors: common carrier telecommunications, broadcasting and television, aviation, shipping, transport, meteorology, agriculture, education, postal services and industry. WCY will provide the opportunity for all nations to undertake an in-depth review and analysis of the policies on communications development and stimulate the accelerated development of communications infrastructures.

The entire programme of WCY activities is to be financed on the basis of voluntary contributions.

(**Asian Women**, June 1982, p. 12)