

The New Saudi Woman : Modernizing in an Islamic Framework ⁽¹⁾

Saudi women of to-day are clearly on the move, taking an increased role in social and economic life. Among them are doctors, university professors, mathematicians, scientists, bank directors and radio announcers. There are at least half a million female students at all educational levels. This progress is the more remarkable when we consider that public education for Saudi women began only 22 years ago.

In Saudi Arabia to-day, there are two contrary, yet parallel, phenomena; while there is a high degree of openness to modern culture and technology, there is also an increasing degree of adherence to the values of Islam, as shown in the veiling of women, sexual segregation and the domination of Islamic customs and traditions in people's ideas and practices. Many factors influence policies affecting women and society in general: first, the considerable social development; second, the expansion of education and use of technology; third, the presence of affluent foreign workers: Egyptians, Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians, etc; fourth, the spread of modern means of communications: telephones, radios, TV's, cassettes and women's magazines from other Arab countries; fifth, the employment of foreign female servants from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India and other countries of the Far East; sixth, the spread of women's welfare associations which carry on varied social activities, such as opening female libraries and holding training courses in domestic tasks.

Women's Employment

Women's contributions to daily newspapers focus on national issues as well as on their own problems. One woman journalist is editor of a women's section composed of twelve female journalists for the daily *Al-Ryadh*. Presently about 25,000 Saudi women are employed by the government in the fields of education, health, administration and social services.

(Continued on page 7)

(1) Abridgement of an article written by Lou'ay Bahry, published in *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 36, no. 4, Autumn 1982, pp. 502-515.

(Continued from page 6)

Banks exclusively for women have existed in Riyadh and Jeddah since 1980⁽¹⁾, employing 120 female graduates in economic and public administration. Women also operate small tailoring establishments and hair dressing salons. Other enterprises, which have proved to be financially successful, have had a beneficial psychological impact on women.

The problems met by working women are those facing their colleagues everywhere else: the problem of child care and the necessity of increasing day-care centers, the rigidity of male superiors with female employees, and promotion.

A working wife can counter the effects of inflation and high prices and help raise her family's standard of living. Women on the public payroll receive equal pay for equal work. They are enthusiastic about working in certain sectors, such as education and social services, but abstain from studying nursing which the public generally considers a servile profession.

Marriage and Family

Changes occurring during the past twenty years have created the following problems regarding marriage: first, the rising cost of the Mahr (bride-price), which has become a handicap for many young men, even those from the rising, educated middle class desiring to marry. Second, with the expansion of education, the question of the desirability of marrying a highly educated woman has arisen. Educated women are becoming more selective in choosing their mates while eligible men tend to marry girls younger than themselves, often less than twenty years old. Other problems revolve around a woman's work after marriage: is it feasible? Should it be encouraged or not? The question is still a matter of debate.

The role of women in the family is another subject of discussion. The practice of polygamy has been questioned and debated. Many educated people, including jurists, are asking that the severe restrictions imposed by Islam on multiple wives be

strictly observed. Two other current matters of discussion are: the money earned by the wife and how it should be dealt with; and divorced women and how they should be treated. Fear of divorce is one of the reasons pushing married women to continue to work, since employment gives them a feeling of security in facing the future.

Progress in Higher Education Still Insufficient

In spite of the dramatic advance made in the field of female higher education, there is a scarcity of female professors in colleges and departments where teachers are required to be female. Also the insistence upon separate libraries for women creates a problem of library facilities. The fields of women's specialization are still limited to education, liberal arts and medicine. Increasing demands have been made for an all-female university which would not be tied administratively and academically to men's universities.

Questions for the Future

University education for women has raised other social problems as well. One is the problem of leisure and recreation. Liberals propose the establishment of summer camps for girls, the introduction of sports in girls' schools and the opening of women's clubs. Such innovations are opposed by conservatives, who base their case on religious grounds.

Optimism regarding the future of Saudi women rests first on the growing recognition of woman as a social force in the country; second, and in a large measure, on the constant promotion and encouragement given by the Royal Family to the development of a new role for women and their integration in development.

In the opinion of experts, however, a true liberation movement should include the removal of the veil, the complete elimination of polygamy and equal rights to divorce for men and women. Though we hear of research being done by university women students on campus and off campus, we have not yet come across any samples; such research is badly needed as a guide to future plans and projects.

(1) See *Al-Raida*, Aug. 1, 1982, Vol. V, no. 21, p. 7.