

## Saudi Women and Industry

*His Majesty King Fahd has initiated a new plan for the integration of women in the industrialization endeavors of Saudi Arabia.* Fifty thousand girls are to join the emerging new labor force in the factories to be set up for women only. The rationale for these endeavors has centered around the need for women's economic participation and the improvement of their status, women constitute half the population, and according to *Aisha Almana*<sup>(\*)</sup> «are emerging as a major social force, demanding an increase in their participation in the economic and social life of the country and calling for the recognition of their active and necessary roles in the development process».<sup>(1)</sup>

At present women comprise less than four per cent of the labor force. The need for trained labor force has been a strong incentive for women's economic activity, and the country is in need of the fifty per cent of its human resources to relieve the economy from the shortage of «manpower». The potential female labor force entrants can be seen as substitutes for part of the expatriate labor force. The importation of foreign workers places a strain on the social fabric of the society, and these bottlenecks face countries that have their economies based on the export of oil. Realizing the need for women's potential contributions, the Minister of Planning in Saudi Arabia says «The issue is not whether women will work, but where».<sup>(2)</sup>

The Qur'an does not discriminate against women, but rather calls on all believers to work. Women's right to employment was recognized in the Qur'an, and existed since the early days of Islam. The late *King Faisal* on a state visit stated «that the most important requirements Islam calls for are: to maintain progress, to carry out justice, to create equality...».<sup>(3)</sup>

The fundamental guidelines that were delineated in Saudi Arabia's development plans focussed on the vital objective of diversifying the Saudi economy by developing the agricultural and industrial sectors. The growth of the oil sector has generated capital surpluses to be invested in development projects, which will have a decisive effect on women's participation in the labor force. When examining the third five year plan (1980-

1985), one of the policies advocated «expanding the base of female employment in a fashion which will increase human output...».<sup>(4)</sup>

Within the same plan, the most important imperative was the direction of the media towards «altering society's attitudes towards the work of women and their contribution to the development and evolution of the country based on our orthodox Islamic values».<sup>(5)</sup>

In an interview with *Dr. Hikmat al-Arabi*,<sup>(6)</sup> head of the women's department of the Ministry of Planning, on the new initiative of His Majesty *King Fahd*, she said that women have been able to hold high positions in the work structure, and this indicates that women have the capacity and the potential. His Majesty *King Fahd* has given special attention to the status of women, trying to integrate her in new sectors of the development policies.

*Dr. Aisha Almana* stressed the need to carry out a feasibility study to assess the skilled labor that is needed for the project, as well as to have the right institutions that will train women, since it is very essential to have these factories run by the indigenous women. She also emphasized the need of relieving the country's dependence on foreign labor so that it can have a self-sustained economic growth. *Almana* referred to Japan as an example of a highly industrialized country where women were integrated in the industrial sector, but still safeguarded their traditions and customs. Women in Japan constitute forty per cent of the industrial labor force among the age group 20-24, but this rate decreases for the age group of 25-40, and then increases after the age of forty. According to *Almana*, this is a firm indicator of the strong motherly role, where the value of proper childcare and strong family ties are still high on the priority list.

The integration of women in social and economic development does not mean rejection of the traditional role of Arab women or the blind imitation of other societies; women will continue to be key members in the family.

It is very important to be aware of the potential role of Arab women in the development of their respective societies.

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(1) Almana, Aisha. «Saudi Arabia: An Emerging Social Force», in *Sisterhood is Global*, Robin Morgan, ed., p. 587.

(2) Newland, Kathleen. *The Sisterhood of Man*, p. 148.

(3) Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of passports and Nationality, Pilgrims statistics for 1391 A.H.-1971 A.D.

(4) Al-Farsy, Fouad. *Saudi Arabia: A Case Study in Development*, p. 152.

(5) Ibid., p. 153.

(6) Sayidaty, November 4-10, 1985, p. 24.