

Saudi Women and Work

The evolution and development of the economy in Saudi Arabia have produced new employment opportunities and have stimulated an increase in the awareness regarding the potential of women.

The fact that most working women are still concentrated in the so-called feminine occupations of education, health and social planning should not be a discouraging factor, since these areas are in need of qualified indigenous people especially with the growing shortages of manpower. According to *Aisha Almana*, a prominent sociologist in Saudi Arabia, «this separation has, however, contributed to women's holding higher positions in the work structure albeit in running the female sectors».⁽¹⁾

Today, there is a new trend where women are involved in real estate, construction, commerce or even starting their new business which is not limited to the wealthy. There are many wage workers who also have their own business. *Almana* gives the example of a nomadic woman who worked as a janitor from 7 A.M. to 2 P.M., and then worked in her store in the afternoons and evenings, and now owns her own house as well as two grocery stores and attends a literacy programme two hours every day. In an article in *Al-Sharkiah*⁽²⁾, three successful Saudi women discussed their experiences in starting their own business and how they entered areas that were traditionally dominated by men. Females are starting to diversify their fields of study to include sciences, business, engineering and so forth. *Abir Salameh* is a twenty-four year old contractor who works with builders and who also owns a bakery in Jeddah. *Raeda Bin Laden* is an interior designer and runs her own gallery, and there is *Najwa al-Olafi* who is in the fashion business and has a shop for women's clothes.

Women associations in Saudi Arabia have played an important role in improving women's conditions. The first women's association was founded in 1960 with the support of princess *Iffat*, wife of the late *King Faisal*, who also supported the admission of women into prim-

ary and higher education institutions. The right of equal educational opportunities has increased the work potential of women since education has a direct linkage to women's participation in the labor force. Better education and more opportunities in employment would render women capable of contributing to the process of development in Saudi Arabia, and therefore to a more sustainable and balanced socio-economic growth.

There are three women associations in Jeddah, namely: «Al-Jamieah al-Nisaciah al-Khairiah», «Al-Jameiah al-Faisaliah», «Jam'iat al-Bir al-Khairiah». These associations offer social services and financial aid to needy families and health care services for children in nurseries. They also offer educational services such as typing courses.

Other Saudi women occupy jobs such as deans-of women's colleges, directors of different female institutions and schools. *Dr. Ibtissam al-Bassam* was recently appointed as director of *King Fahd Academy* in London. She has a Bachelor degree in English Literature from Cairo University, and a PHD in Education from the University of Michigan. She was head of the English department in the school of education in Jeddah, and the dean of the school of education in Riyadh before she became director of *King Fahd Academy* in London.⁽³⁾ *Tahira al-Hafith* is another Saudi woman who has been working in England since 1966 as a designer of Kaftans. She exhibited recently in London a collection of rare Bedouin costumes that belonged to different tribes of the Arabian Peninsula.

There is no doubt that the role of women in the development of Saudi Arabia will increase as a result of social, economic and educational growth. The restrictive nature of some local traditions regarding the role of women are still considerable, but these are bound to wither as a result of greater governmental efforts and recognition of the economic freedom that Islam bestows to women.

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

(2) *Al-Sharkiah*, November 1985, pp. 54-56.

(3) *Sayidaty*, October 21, 1985, p. 53.