

Women in Management Means Women in Power:

Implications for Society, Family and Culture in the Arab World

At first glance, the general topic of women in management does not appear especially controversial, revolutionary, or potentially threatening to the established social order. However, a closer examination of Arab women's role in management, as well as a consideration of the social, political and cultural ramifications of women's actual and potential power as decision-makers, reveals the stirrings of a significant revolution in attitudes, values, and behaviors concerning gender, power and social structure in the Arab world. Investigating the topic of Arab women and management also highlights the many and varied obstacles which confront Arab women as they strive to attain decision-making positions in business, banking, industry and public administration. Although most of these obstacles are social and cultural, the internal obstacles arising from a woman's own self-image, education and childhood gender socialization are no less formidable.

As participants from a number of Arab countries recently discovered at a conference held in Beirut, "The Arab Woman and Business Management," women in the Arab world still have very far to go in their efforts to gain not only management positions, but also the legitimacy, power and respect so necessary to any manager's job performance. The confer-

ence, held in late May, was a joint project of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World of the Lebanese American University and the Lebanese Management Association, and was sponsored by Mrs. Nazik Hariri, wife of Lebanon's Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, and by the Canadian Government. According to Dr. Julinda Abu Nasr, Director of the Institute

for Women's Studies in the Arab World, the main goals of the conference were to objectively investigate the reasons for women's relative absence from the decision-making ranks of management in the public and private sectors in the Arab world, to ascertain the characteristics common to those Arab women who have been successful in attaining management positions, and to suggest methods and measures to facilitate women's increased attainment of decision-making positions. Conference participants also discussed important ancillary issues, such as the stresses and strains of balancing the demands of work and home, and the potentially important role of women managers in the non-profit and non-governmental sector.

The file of this issue of *Al-Raïda* features translations and summaries of three of the conference presentations. Ideally, we would have preferred to publish all of the conference papers, but due to the lack of space, we are not able to include each and every one. We have thus selected presentations dealing with broad themes, such as the difficulty women face in balancing the demands of work and home, and the social, cultural and psychological obstacles which still confront Arab

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women as they strive for promotion, power and influence in the work place. The presentations and proceedings of the conference will be published in Arabic in the near future by the Lebanese Management Association.

Although the various speakers, representing both the public and private sectors of management throughout the region, focused on different aspects of women's role in management in the Arab world, important and interrelated themes emerged during the three days of presentations, discussions and dialogue. These themes can be contextualized with reference to the Arab woman manager's relation to her work environment, her home environment, and the socio-cultural environment which shapes her sense of self as professional, mother, wife and woman. Clearly, these contexts impinge upon and influence each other. A woman who exercises power effectively and creatively in her work environment will feel a sense of confidence and empowerment which will undoubtedly carry over to her home life, where it will be expressed in strong and competent communication and parenting skills as well as effective financial management and joint decision-making with her husband. Conversely, a wife and mother who has had years of successful experience running a busy household, bud-

getting for weekly supplies and coordinating the schedules and activities of many different people will be able to transfer these skills effectively in any management position.

Women who are increasingly accustomed to exercising power and authority as managers and home-makers will eventually demand that they

they see before them; the places at the top, it seems, are still reserved for men only. In 1970, only 18.5 percent of managers in the United States were women. By 1992, there had been some improvement, evidenced by the fact that women accounted for 42 percent of all U.S. managers in that year. But senior management positions continue to be a pre-

dominantly male domain. In 1992, women filled only five percent of top management positions in the U.S. (1) Women managers in the Arab world face no less daunting obstacles to attaining top leadership and decision-making positions. Indeed, the "glass ceiling" hindering promotion of women in the Arab world may well be somewhat lower than that of the United States or

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Canada. In both the Arab and the Western cultural contexts, women's entry into the top tier of decision-making positions is hindered by powerful cultural assumptions that a woman cannot be a successful worker while also maintaining effectiveness in her roles as wife and mother. However, according to Abla Nuwais (see article, this issue), recent research on working women in the United Arab Emirates clearly contradicts this commonly accepted cultural belief.

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fined by masculine values, beliefs and behavior patterns favoring rigidly hierarchical command structures, "zero-sum game" ideologies, narrow specialization, asymmetrical relationships and pronounced competitiveness. Women's conceptions of power are usually more egalitarian and cooperative, with a focus on group problem-solving and consensus-building, rather than the domination of the many by the few. According to one scholar, "feminist management emphasizes connectiveness, cooperation and mutuality over separativeness, competition and individual success....The presence of women managers in corporations has resulted in basic organizational assumptions being questioned, new ideas being offered, and previously untried approaches being adopted." (2) In a rapidly-changing world market, in which more people of widely diverse cultural back-

grounds must cooperate and coordinate now than at any time in history, perhaps women's cultural conceptions of power offer a more constructive way of managing diverse workforces in new and challenging situations.

The obstacles confronting Arab professional women in the home and in her social and cultural setting are difficult to surmount, but the biggest obstacle may well be her own self-image and her deeply-ingrained and socially-imparted sense of her inadequacies and limitations as a woman. In assessing the characteristics common to successful women managers in the Arab world, conference presenters stressed that a woman who has self-confidence, education, ambition and a willingness to work hard will usually succeed, no matter how many cultural and social obstacles block her path. It is the woman who defines herself, rather than the woman

who lets society, family or culture define her, who will rise highest and fastest in the ranks of management. The lesson to be drawn from the conference on Arab Women and Management (which has applications in many social and political domains, not simply in the immediate contexts of the business world or public administration) is that women should not wait passively to be handed power; nor women should let men define the nature and uses of power. If Arab women are to be successful and realize their goals and dreams, they must claim their own power in their own ways and use it wisely and creatively for the benefit of their societies, families, corporations, governments and themselves. Such a spirit of enterprising initiative would indeed lead to a cultural, social and gender revolution in the Arab world.

— Laurie King-Irani
Editor

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A general view of the audience during the opening of the conference on "Arab Women and Business Management."

Yancey, Patricia Martin. "Feminist Practice in Organizations: Implications for Management" in **Women in Management**, Ellen A. Fagenson, Ed. New York: Sage Publications, 1993, p. 277.

2ibid., pp. 302, 306.