

## **Women and the Saudi job market: Where to from here?**

Saudi Arabia is undergoing an overhaul of its make-up and is drastically changing practically on a daily basis. Not only have these changes been profound, they have also been extremely rapid, visible to everyone outside the Kingdom looking in and also to those living within the Kingdom.

From education and universities to economic centers, developments and previously unheard-of expansions in the Kingdom's infra-structures, the overall impression is one of a booming country that in a few short years has transformed itself from an average run-of-the-mill position to a competitive and flourishing nation where the atmosphere is ripe for professional adventures and new business ventures that go beyond the world of oil --- a word synonymous to Saudi Arabia. And although Saudi Arabia is a relatively young country, with much of its population under the age of 25, the speed at which these changes are taking place, especially in the educational domain, are proving that its ambitious goals may definitely be achieved.

In this new Saudi era, opportunities are opening as business enterprises and schemes are mushrooming across the country, not just the three main cities of Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam. As districts grow and new inner-cities are created, the need for professionals is on the increase, especially on the educational front.

The unknown is always dreaded, whether it's with regards to a new country or a different culture, a new job or change of house, a new relationship or phase in one's life. And fear of the unknown breeds stereotypes that remain fixed in people's minds, no matter how hard they try to remove them. Misunderstandings and misconceptions are born out of ignorance. They propagate because corrections and rectifications are rarely made, and the attempts which are made are replaced by skepticism on the part of the listener or reader when insistence and repetitions of certain notions are used in defense or justification of an unknown difference.

And so, to give but a few examples, the Japanese will always be renowned for technology, Sony and the number of photos they take... the French will always be loved for their croissants, fashion and Chanel no.5... the Italians for their Fiats, Ferraris, pasta or is it their mafia?... the Cubans for their cigars and the Americans for fast-food, Hollywood and conspiracies, implying that nothing other than these traits exist in these nationalities, making communication of realities difficult to attain because they have been summarized in a one-sentenced/one-word expression.

And then there is "us"... that much unknown entity, unexplained, mysterious and seemingly contradictory.... the Saudi female. Engulfed in her black abaya and veil, she depicts the epitome of the unapproachable. Does she have a voice, or indeed a face? What kind of life does she lead, or, more appropriately, is she capable of leading, with

all the restrictions that seem to hinder her? How does she contribute to society or is her role confined to child-bearing?

These stereotypes of the Saudi woman are far from the truth, and they have come about as a result of uninformed sensationalist writings that prefer to focus on the so-called out-of-the ordinary, because her way of life, on the surface, is so at odds with that of the rest of the world. And so, she is depicted as oppressed, subservient to and suffocated by men, uneducated, not allowed to work and inferior to her partner, and that's just for starters! It always surprises me that this is still the opinion of some journalists' writings in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We are also to blame, as lack of proper exposure on our behalf has led to these misconceptions. But this too is changing, as with the changing face of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi woman has revealed herself to the outside world as being a strong and ambitious individual influencing and participating positively in society. In many ways stubborn, she understands that education is her key to success and will unlock the doors to her goals.

And Islam encourages education, regardless of gender, making education both a right and a responsibility. It does not hinder progression of women and we must stop thinking of Islam as being responsible for impeding her success on a national or international level.

She begins her success at undergraduate level, where, according to national figures, she is, comparatively speaking, achieving better scores than her male counterpart. Women constitute more than 58% of the total number of university-level students, and government statistics have shown that the female student population at the Bachelor degree level has more than tripled from 93 486 in the scholastic year of 1995/96 to 340 857 in 2005/06.

Their determination is also reflected in the growing numbers of women entering higher education and, dissatisfied by a Bachelor degree are in search of a Masters or PhD not only in Saudi institutions but also in foreign universities where they register in specialties that are unavailable, but needed, in the Kingdom at the same time as benefitting from an education abroad with all that it has to offer culturally.

This in itself shows how much the social perception on women's education at university level has changed: more and more families want their daughters to pursue and succeed in higher education, a large number approving of their daughters travelling abroad, taking advantage of the King Abdullah Scholarship which has sent thousands of students overseas since its foundation.

It is clear that the Saudi government has come to regard education a major priority in the strategic planning of the country, guaranteeing free education to all male and female citizens with a preliminary goal of eradicating illiteracy from the country which, by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, was at 15% for men and 2% for women, lower only in Yemen and Afghanistan. In comparison, and to be seen as an accomplishment, literacy rates rose to 73% for men and 48% for women by the end of the 1980s, and now stand at 85% according to a 2009 United Nations Development Program report and, according to the World Bank in 2008, at 96.20% for females aged between 15 and 24.

The Saudi government has invested millions in education in order to achieve its objectives in universal education and, according to the Ministry of Education, has increased its budgetary spending from \$ 12.5 billion in 2002, to \$ 25.7 billion in 2007, to \$ 28 billion in 2008, to \$ 32.5 billion in 2009.

7% of the country's budget is allocated to higher education; that is close to \$ 10 billion and measures have been taken in the last couple of years to increase the number of institutions for post high-school education. As a result we now count a total of 32 private and governmental universities for men and women – 24 are public and 8 are private – and over 485 colleges. The over 1211 departments incorporated in these institutions offer courses that are required in the public and private sectors. In addition, vocational institutes such as those specializing in home economics have also increased.

Twinning and joint programs with European or American universities are new to the Saudi educational system and are proving successful as they enable young women who are unable to travel or whose families are more conservative, to pursue their education at home. It's a way of bringing education to their doorsteps.

A country's true development, economic growth and international success can only come about when it uses 100% of its human resources – male and female. Not to be overlooked, women are playing an increasingly important role in the building of this new society. Never before has their input been as effective as it is today as progressively more women enter the job market, in both the public and private sectors.

Most women work in the government sector accounting for 95% of working Saudi women, of which 85% are in education, 6% in public health and 4% in administrative jobs. The government has recently created another 52 000 jobs to be opened in the teaching sector for women and the Ministries of Education, Finance and Civil Service have also been asked by the Government to resolve the employment issue as fast as possible. The remaining 5% of working Saudi women are employed in the private sector in either banks or private businesses and organisations, showing an increase of 27% in 2006 and 2007.

And this trend is ongoing with banks at the top of the list, regularly hiring a large number of young women, training them and giving them opportunities to climb the corporate ladder. Others start their own businesses, beginning small and steadily growing, consequently opening up new opportunities by hiring other women.

And yet, only 15% of the Saudi work force is made up of women; which means that there is a huge amount of untapped human resources yet to be taken advantage of. This being the lowest in the region, we must probe into the reasons to understand why.

Generally speaking, the main reasons preventing women from entering the work force are associated to traditions, unsupportive fathers, husbands or brothers and lack of the appropriate education and experience.

- Where it is social, a family or husband feels that it is unnecessary for the daughter/wife to work. This is personal and we need to keep in mind that Saudi Arabia is a very traditional country which is going through enormous changes at a very fast pace. We cannot expect everyone to agree with these changes as changes can never be imposed on anyone. They have to be understood and assimilated before being accepted.
- Educationally, there is a great need for training women in all fields. All organisations and institutions, private or public, should give women the same opportunities given to men and make training available to their employees, focusing on transferable skills to guarantee better outcomes and higher employee standards by promoting team-work, analysis and skills development, problem solving, communication skills and creativity, all of which are skills that are not taught by the present educational system.

Curricula, too, need to be reviewed to meet the demands of the labour market, but more importantly, methods of teaching need to change whether at the school or university level, and this for both males and females.

- On a legal level, constraints still exist, preventing women to excel in their chosen careers. These are being reviewed at present by the government in order to bring up to date and modernize the legal system according to the social changes that are taking place at the moment. The Eighth Five-year plan (2005-2010) stressed the importance of greater female participation in the national economy by providing women with more job opportunities.

Education and training are key words in present-day Saudi Arabia, for both men and women. Through them, the country will prosper and this in turn will refine and redefine our society. There are many examples of successful Saudi business women and entrepreneurs, too numerous to mention, and all have served their community in one way or another.

There is still a lot to be done and many challenges lay ahead of us. Partnering with different entities will help us reach our potential.

Women are by nature creative. They usually find ways of getting what they want. Saudi women are no exception...