

United Arab Emirates
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The black veil is still by and large in place, but is the woman behind it in the stereotyped position of subjugation and dominance that much of the world associates with her, especially in the workplace? This article examines the position of Muslim women in the workplace in one of the richest Gulf countries, the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Arab Work Force

The Arab work force is unique in the sense that it employs more expatriate workers than nationals. According to a study prepared jointly by the Arab Monetary Fund and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development in 1995, the Arab work force accounts for around 28 per cent of the population, which is a very low ratio compared with international levels. The study says this ratio stands at 49.1 per cent in industrialized nations, 43.7 per cent in other developing countries and 50 per cent in the world at large. The study further indicates that the Arab work force in the 22-member Arab League was estimated at around 67.5 million in 1993 and was expected to grow by 3.3 per cent annually till 1995, and at 3.6 per cent between 1995 and 2000. This would add 2.3 million workers per year until 1995 and around 3 million per year between 1995 and 2000. Women workers in the Arab world form nearly 19 per cent of the total work force compared with 43 per cent in Western industrial countries and 35 per cent in Third World countries. The study also expresses concern about the fact that in the Gulf, regional states are heading for an internal labour imbalance as the work-force is growing faster than demand. Growth in the number of female workers at around 4 per cent during the 90's has exceeded that of male workers, and consequently the base of demographic pyramid labour supply exceeds demand. With more women getting educated and professionally qualified, jobs which were previously filled by expatriates are being sought by nationals.

History and Today

Historically, Islam recognizes the important role that women play in society. Ayesha, the daughter of the Prophet, was said to have led an army of 30,000 soldiers. It is reported in the Qur'an and from history that women not only expressed their opinions freely in the Prophet's presence, but also argued and participated in serious discussions with him and other Muslim leaders of the time. In this century, Turkey, Pakistan and Bangladesh have had women political leaders. But Ciller, Bhutto and Rahman come from privileged backgrounds, and the gap between them and the average Muslim woman is quite vast.

A question which arises frequently, especially in the case of many Muslim countries, is why do women so often come out in second place professionally? This point was highlighted recently by Dr Moza Ghobash, Professor of Sociology at the Emirates University of Al Ain in Abu Dhabi while speaking at a forum on 'Women and Management: Challenges and Opportunities for the Year 2000', which I attended. Ghobash pointed out that this opposition stems from a male reluctance to see a woman assume 'charisma' and social standing, and has its roots not in Islamic precepts, but rather in practice. While Islam makes it the paramount duty of men and women to learn, and the woman is ordered by God, as is the man, to learn, to read, to seek the truth and to educate herself. Unfortunately, reality lies elsewhere. Details of a recent study on the under-representation of young Muslim women in higher education and professional employment reveal that Muslim women are 'often perceived as an invisible and unobtrusive element of the labour market and under-utilized in terms of their potential as human resources

Subjugated to What Extent? Women in the Workplace today in the United Arab Emirates

contributing to the economy' (*Q-News International*, No. 284, January 1998). The study found that Muslim girls face intense family pressure to select feminine career options like home economics, and are actively discouraged from pursuing interests in engineering or management.

In interviewing people over the years, during the course of my travels for writing, I have been told time and again that this kind of family reticence largely stems from the fact that a man would not like a wife who is more educated than he is, and therefore can command more social standing. Girls consequently feel pressurized to conform, to groom themselves to be wives and mothers. Individual career aspirations are rarely an option. Families too are concerned with social pressure and acceptance. If a daughter is perceived to be a maverick or aggressively career-minded, her chances in the marriage market are lessened and the family faces humiliation from social peers. Muslim men in some countries are unwilling to share economic power with their wives, fearing competition from within the home, and a relative loss of position and power in the workplace. Their world is a comfortable monopoly and they guard it well. Roles are clearly defined, one is the breadwinner, the other the homemaker, and overlapping of roles is usually frowned upon. Yet, changes are coming about and nowhere is this more evident than in the UAE today.

The United Arab Emirates

Some Arab countries of today find more and more of their womenfolk stepping outside the threshold of their homes to find their own place under the sun. The United Arab Emirates, a country which is a confederation of seven Emirates, namely Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah and Umm Al Quwain, seems to be leading the way in this regard.

In a significant move which springs to attention from my travels even ten years ago, when national UAE women were wary of interacting with strangers in the workplace, and few were gainfully employed, today's working woman in the UAE is an increasingly central figure, holding responsible positions in the private and public sectors. One of the main reasons for this is the increase in numbers of educated women. Today, more women than men are opting for higher education, and better still, are completing their studies instead of opting out halfway – always an easy option for people who have among the highest per capita incomes in the

world. In terms of numbers, the number of female students in schools went up from 4 per cent in the 1970's to more than 50 per cent in the '90's. Most of these girls go on to finish their college education, after which a suitable job is just a step away. The large number of working women in the age group of 25 years and below is having a domino effect on their siblings and friends. They become role models for the young, an active group of increasingly independent and outspoken women, who now come out openly to proclaim, 'I have ideas just like any other person, man or woman. I have a particular viewpoint that I would like to put across, that I would like to see bear fruit' (Kawther Mohammed Ahmed, Assistant Branch Manager of the National Bank of Dubai to Gulf News, 4 Dec 1996).

In the UAE, participation of women in the labour force has risen from 5.3 per cent in 1980 to 12 per cent in 1995, according to a UAE socio-economic development report. The Ministry of Information Yearbook for 1997 attributed this significant rise to the government's policy of providing equal educational and professional opportunities to men and women to further the development of its total human resource group. A percentage increase of women in the total population was also cited as a reason for the increase. In the UAE, many women are employed in the government sector, particularly in the areas of education and health. Interestingly enough, their numbers in the federal civil service are also on the rise, currently accounting for almost 40 per cent of the total employees. Women are also breaking new ground in the police force, with a growing number of policewomen performing various functions from criminal investigations to customs control.

Male Bastions Stormed

A women's team from UAE's General Department of Protective Security recently won a gold medal in the US in 1997. The General Department of Protective Security carries out specialist protection services on behalf of the government which includes protecting VIP visitors and trade establishments. Protective services at this level require highly complex knowledge and training, which include shooting with various types of weapons, and mental and physical development to react effectively in hostile and dangerous situations. A large number of women have also entered the last all-male bastion – a military school only for women, the Khawla Bint Al Azwar Women's Military School in Abu Dhabi. All women joining the School have an intermediate level

school certificate and after training serve in the armed forces for at least five years. The six-month training course includes field training on self-defence and combat techniques, in addition to tactical and theoretical courses. At the end of the course, candidates have to pass an examination which qualifies them to graduate with a military rank. A significant number of women have shown interest in the course and the numbers are rising each year.

Women in the UAE today are found in almost all spheres of economic activity. Banking is perhaps their most preferred vocation, followed by other government services, such as police, customs and other regulatory services. The last year has seen their numbers increase in the private sector as well, where their level of education normally determines the position they hold. Some join the managerial cadres, while others have come to terms with holding non-managerial jobs, thus making them competitive in the job market along with expatriate workers. Traditional career options for women also hold great appeal, such as nursing, teaching, and social welfare.

Conclusion

The case of the UAE presents a break with many other Muslim societies even today, where for example in nearby Saudi Arabia, women are still not permitted to drive or be seen in public without the mandatory black veil. What seems worth noting in the case of the UAE is not so much the exact numbers of women in paid work; but that in the 1990's, in sharp contrast to even the 1970's, the 'working woman' is operating as an increasingly central figure; and seems to have appeared alongside the 'housewife and mother', as a paradigmatic feminine subject in the social, economic and cultural discourses of the UAE. She is certainly today one of the icons around which the UAE's position as a 'modern' Muslim country is legitimized; and this iconic figure is premised – both covertly and overtly – on the working woman rather than the housewife. ◆