

Saudi Women and Education

In 1985, Saudi Arabia celebrated 25 years of state education for women who constitute 25 per cent of the total students of the Kingdom. Moreover, although Saudi Arabia is considered to be a conservative society, available data show that significant advances have taken place in the field of education since 1960. Girls equal boys in numbers at every school level and are considered better achievers by their teachers.

Traditional education in Saudi Arabia was until the 1960's in the hand of teachers who taught their pupils religious and social studies at private schools. Only boys used to attend these schools which still exist nowadays especially in areas where there are no government school facilities, but only kindergartens and primary level classes. As for girls, there were no government schools available prior to the 60's, and only private tutoring existed for daughters of the wealthy.

Saudi Arabia's first modern girls's school, Dar Al-Hanan, was founded in 1956 in Jeddah by King Faisal's wife, Iffat, who believed that girls as well as boys were to be taught to participate in the technological world of the 20th century. The school was at first intended for orphans and other young women who needed education to enable them to earn a living as adults. Today, Dar Al-Hanan is one of the country's elite schools and has a small philanthropic boarding school for the needy.

Nowadays, says a medical professor at King Abdul-Aziz University, «people think quite differently about what women and girls can and should do within society». ⁽¹⁾ Although girls still marry young, marriage

is not the obstacle to further education that is encountered in many parts of the world.

Many of Dar Al-Hanan's pupils, will go to university after marriage and might choose to work later.

Christianne Jalkh seems to confirm the fact that the situation of women in Saudi Arabia has improved a lot in the last 20 years. ⁽²⁾ She says that women who were illiterate want their daughters to go to school. The same goes for men who married uneducated women. Moreover, says *Jalkh*, Saudi women don't marry as early as before and do not want as many children. Many married women, she writes, go to evening schools and others chose to remain single in order to give all their time to their careers.

«Saudi women have high hopes», writes *Aisha Almana*, a Saudi sociologist and previous Director of Women's Social Bureau. ⁽³⁾ This is based in part on the increase in educational and training opportunities which began in 1962, she explains. In 1960 there were 3 girls' schools in Riyadh and 1200 students in them. In 1982, women were 25 per cent of students at Riyadh University. Today they constitute more than 35 per cent of the total students of Saudi Arabia, more than 14,000 of them are enrolled in teachers' colleges and universities. Furthermore, their numbers are increasing and the projected number of female enrollment in colleges is expected to reach more than 40,000 by the late 1980's. *Almana* predicts.

Women are enrolled mainly in the social sciences, in

(1) Searight, Sarah, «Saudi Women: The Educational Revolution», *The Middle East Magazine* No. 133, Nov. 85, pp. 38-39.

(2) Jalkh, Christianne, «Arabie Saoudie. Une prison dorée», in *Terre des Femmes*, Editions La Decouverte/Maspero, pp. 139-146.

(3) Almana, Aisha. «Saudi Arabia, An Emerging Social Force», in *Sisterhood is Global*, Robin Morgan ed., pp. 587-588.

medical schools, and teachers' preparation colleges — all of which prepare them for jobs in the traditional female sector of female education, social welfare and medical services. In fact, Saudi education is sex-segregated since age six. It is divided into primary, intermediate and secondary levels. Numbers fall considerably at the transition to the intermediate level and still further, at the secondary one. A 1979-80 survey showed women's enrollment in primary school to be 55 per cent and secondary school 23 per cent.⁽⁴⁾

Sex-segregation at schools means that facilities are duplicated and that libraries, for example, are open one day a week only for women. But this apparent extravagance is seen necessary as long as it serves the aim of educating the female population.

Only in the medical field are the barriers down, says *Searight*.⁽⁵⁾ She sees that as an important indicator for the future because Saudis recognize how desperately they need medical staff, although there is pressure on women to specialize mainly in obstetrics or gynecology. *Searight* mentions a recent television programme on girls in Saudi Arabia which called them «the doctors, scientists and teachers of the future». She says that Saudi women see the need to «Saudi-ize» the country's work force, i.e. to get rid of foreigners who are occupying many categories of employment, in order that they (women) be accepted in the wider labor market.

In fact, there is already some progress in this direction especially in the civil service, in banking where

there are separate branches for women, and in tailoring. *Searight* mentions that the Institute of Public Administration in the Kingdom has recently opened a women's section which is developing work opportunities for women only. She quotes students at the institute as saying that «no one minds if we work alongside computers». She also says that the only vocational training centers for women in Saudi Arabia are tailoring institutes where women who have left school after primary school can qualify to attend the two-year course. After graduation, these women can apply for a government loan of 200,000 Saudi Rials (\$54,000) to help set up their own establishments.

According to the General Secretariat for Girls' Colleges statistics for 84-85, women in Saudi Arabia have majored in agriculture, medicine, allied medical sciences, religious subjects and the sciences. Only engineering, architecture and pharmacy remain exclusively male.⁽⁶⁾

It also appears that the trend reported in the early 70's of an increasing number of Saudi women entering the labor market as nurses, medical technicians, doctors, social workers, newspaper writers, radio announcers and so on, is gaining momentum. Actually, the government in its official development operating plan for 1980-85 unequivocally committed itself to «providing appropriately for the education of women» and to expand the academic fields offered.⁽⁷⁾

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(4) *Ibid.*, pp. 139-146.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 38.

(6) Massialas, Byron and Samir Jarrar, *Education in the Arab World Praeger*, pp. 245-247.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 247.