

## **The changing role of women in Saudi Arabia**

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The speech of Her Highness Princess Princess Dima Bint Turki Bin Abdul Aziz in Talberg World Forum in Sweden

Your Highnesses, your excellences, ladies and gentlemen:

I would like to welcome you all to my talk the aim of which is to challenge some of the misconceptions about the status of women in Saudi society.

I have become aware that in the west, Saudi women are often perceived as totally dominated by men in all spheres of life and therefore unequal to men socially and economically and protected by a combination of strict Islamic laws which have militated against progress in Saudi women's education and employment.

I can assure you that there is a mismatch between these perceptions and modern day realities and i must emphasis that Islam neither discourages nor prevents women from engaging economically and politically in society. In fact, the reverse is true: that Islam embraces the contributions that women are able to make.

Where women in Muslim societies have been unable to access significant positions in the labor market, the reason for this is to be located in culture rather than religion.

Far from being marginalized or subordinate to men, Saudi women are dynamic.

They are willing and able to take on challenges that have arisen over the past few decades and are able to achieve success in several areas of public and social life.

Let us look at a few facts and figures which bear witness to the claims I am making:

- official government statistics show that in 2005, 56 per cent of all the university graduates in the kingdom were female.

- 31 per cent of all managers and directors in Saudi Arabia are women.

- Estimates show that around 40 per cent of Saudi private wealth is in female hands: in Riyadh women own 25 per cent of real estate and in Jeddah 45 per cent.

- Women hold successful positions as deans of colleges and universities, CEOs of banks and IT experts and also 40 per cent of Saudi medical doctors are female.

• They hold important decision-making positions in

- The Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry

- The Saudi Council of Engineers

- The Saudi Management Society and the Saudi Lawyer's Association.

• Almost all government offices at both national and local levels have appointed women to positions of responsibility.

• There are now several female advisors on the Consultative Council.

• Saudi women are well represented in the arts:

there are several Saudi women artists, photographers, film-makers, journalists, writers and fashion designers who have achieved positive critical acclaim both at home and abroad.

So, do these facts give you the impression that women in Saudi Arabia are oppressed, subordinate to men, unable to find expression for their many talents and abilities?

I think not!

It is, of course, necessary to consider these achievements in some historical context and be aware of how limited the opportunities in education and employment were for Saudi women just one generation ago.

So, what are the major catalysts that have propelled Saudi women into positions of social and economic importance over the last two decades?

- well, after the first Gulf War, some economic restructuring was necessary and as a part of this restructuring there was an increase in the funding of women's education which helps to explain the increasing number of female graduates mentioned earlier.
- Then the steep rise in population has led to greater competition in Saudi society making employment outside the home a financial necessity for some women.
- The demographics of Saudi society have changed. Migration from rural to urban areas has affected the extent to which traditional extended family units are able to control their members. Combine this with the emergence of a large and educated female population and we can understand how men's power to dominate women as they did in previous generations has diminished.
- Then there are changes in marriage with women marrying at a later age than in previous generations. Marriage arrangements are also changing. Many women are now acquainted with their intended spouse is now a major deciding factor. Also, modes of marriage are changing. The majority of young families in Saudi Arabia today are monogamous. I consider it important that these developments be considered in the context of the commitment shown by the Saudi government to the welfare of women. The most important factor is the reforms which King Abdullah has initiated. These bear witness to his support and respect for women and indeed to his belief that Saudi women have important contributions to make to Saudi society. He is committed to the removal of all obstacles which impede the empowerment of women and has called for their integration into the workforce. Protective legislation has been implemented. For example, pregnant women have their jobs protected and receive ten weeks of maternity pay. Employers are legally bound to pay all pregnancy-related health expenses and companies that employ more than 50 women have to have on-site nurseries and allocate breast-feeding time. I am sure that you would agree that these reforms testify to the respect for women's rights on the one hand and you the realization that women are essential in the workforce on the other. Saudi Arabia now has two human rights groups: the non-governmental National Society for Human Rights and the Human Rights Commission which operates under the direct supervision of King Abdullah. The reason I mention these is that protection against abuse and discrimination is an important function of these two bodies and together they constitute formal recognition that attainment of human rights is key in ensuring political and economic justice for women.

Having outlined some of the major changes that have impacted upon the lives of Saudi women, I would now like to briefly point out some of the implications of these changes.

Better education for women means:

\*greater access to employment which in turn gives women greater financial autonomy; increased self-confidence and more scope to become involved in the discussions of religious

matters related to the status of women in Muslim society. In connection with this last point, the economic activity of Saudi women can be legitimized by the best of Islamic precedents. After all Khadijeh, the first wife of the prophet (P.B.U.H) was not only a businesswoman in her own rights but also the employer of the prophet (PBUH) prior to their marriage.

I hope that I have succeeded in convincing you that the Saudi society is undergoing a process of constructive change and that women are the key players in this process.

I can state with confidence that Saudi women are making significant contributions to the progress and development of our country and I firmly believe that they possess attributes that will benefit the kingdom as it works to diversify its economy and achieve success globally in a variety of commercial and financial sectors.

At issue is the pace at which change is being implemented. Those which are impatient of greater female equality the reform process needs to take place in a context of social and economic stability.

Again, I would like to thank the Tallberg Forum for giving me this opportunity to enlighten you of the changing role of Saudi women.