

Chapter 11

Higher Education for Women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

The place of women in Saudi Arabian society is frequently and widely addressed by the media outside the Kingdom, especially by the western mass media that shivers at the sight of women, in 2011, dressed in abayas with their faces covered. Many people outside the Kingdom believe that Saudi women are completely isolated from society and that their role is restricted to bringing up children and fulfilling their husbands' needs. Both of these familial duties do indeed fall largely into the laps of women, but two factors are important to note. The first is that in cities and towns all over Saudi Arabia, women are doing double duty, caring for their families as well as flocking to universities to take advantage of King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz's push

Note on Sources

There is currently very little documentation concerning women's Higher Education in Saudi Arabia. Because much of the material that has surfaced has not been collected and reported in a rigorous manner, a great deal of the material in this chapter is inevitably based on the perceptions of the authors and of the large number of Saudi female academics with whom we have discussed the issues we address. Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education has recently initiated important research projects to provide rigorous information that will contribute to many of the issues raised in the chapter. Wherever possible, our data references information collected since 2009 and supplied to the authors by the Ministry.

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for equal acknowledgement of the status of women in education. The second is that in order for full female participation in the education sector to be achieved, familial imbalances of labour must to some extent shift. This will not happen quickly, nor need it happen in disregard of the cultural practices that are part of Saudi society. But change is coming, and it will continue. Women are already finding informal ways to juggle familial caretaking with professional advancement. Our goal in this chapter is to point to individual, institutional and governmental strategies that can formalise, and thereby facilitate, this integrative process.

Women's Education in Saudi Society: A Brief Overview

In traditional Arab society, the social and economic situation in the Arabian Peninsula played a significant role in women's subordination, as, prior to the discovery of oil, the hard desert life and primitive production methods had rendered Saudi Arabia a relatively traditional survivalist economy. In this economy, women were transparently inferior citizens. Women would help their male relatives on their farms and were occasionally compelled by circumstance to practise limited auxiliary business activities. This was something supplementary to their work in the home and was considered as a service done by particular women to increase the income of their families.

The rise of Saudi women as a social power is considered across Arab society to be the most vital among the social changes currently taking place. About 30 years ago, it was possible to describe Saudi Arabia as 'the society of men' because men monopolised professional work, as well as all kinds of political, economic and social authority. But now this image has started to change, and women are carrying out important roles across all of these spheres. There are female doctors, female university teachers and professors and female businesswomen. Today's Saudi women work in scientific laboratories, in the press and other media and in factories.

As far back as 1926, the Saudi state had established the Education Directorate to supervise the education of boys. This directorate was transformed into the Ministry of Education in 1953, directed by King Fahad, who led the first ministry. It was not until 30 years after the establishment of the Education Directorate for boys that anyone thought of educating girls. The customs and traditions that predominated at that time played an important role in delaying girls' education in Saudi Arabia, as there were different points of view about the subject: supporting opinions, objecting opinions and opinions from those who called for educating girls within specific narrow limits and curricula and from others who supported the idea of opening the doors wide for girls. Given this dissent, the state adopted the approach of gradual development so that the Saudi people at large could understand and accept the idea of women's education.

Before 1959, the only available education for girls in the Kingdom had to be organised in private homes (Katatib) or in private institutions in which girls could

retain all aspects of their Muslim identity. But in 1959, the state announced the launch of girls' education by opening public state schools for girls, which would work in tandem with the scattered private systems in the Katatib. In 1960, the state established the General Presidency for Girls' Education, which would supervise all aspects of girls' education.

The inception of girls' general education began with the opening of 15 primary schools and 1 institute for teacher training in 1960. Kingdom-wide, there were 5,810 female students in that year. By the time that some of the elementary-school girls began to graduate in 1963, intermediate schools (years 7–9) were built, as well as a single secondary school. Five intermediate schools were annexed to primary schools, accommodating 325 students. Since then, the number of schools for girls and the number of female school students have increased rapidly. By 2009, there were 6,855 private schools for girls educating 1,206,958 students, including 2,391 secondary schools catering for 483,146 female students.

The enormous expansion of girls' education primarily can be attributed to the following factors:

- Population growth, which led to an increase in younger age groups: the extent of this increase can be appreciated when we see that in 2010, no less than 45.76 % of the Saudi population was under 20 years of age, compared to 25 % of the American population.
- Concern paid by the state towards providing financial bonuses for the spread of education in all cities, villages and nomadic areas inside the Kingdom.
- Putting the principle of equal opportunity into practice and enabling a full intake of female students at all educational stages.
- Increasing social awareness about the importance of education.

Teacher Training for Female Schools

Generally, female student teachers undergo a 3-year teacher-training programme, during which they learn science and educational subjects that will qualify them to work as primary school teachers. Teacher-training institutes have been opened in many remote areas throughout the Kingdom because the rural Saudi culture makes it extremely difficult for female graduates living in towns to travel back and forth to these areas for work.

Admission of Females to Universities and the Role of the Ministry

Girls started to join Saudi universities in 1961/1962 by studying as irregular 'part-time' students at the Colleges of Arts and Administrative Sciences of King Saud

University, which had been established in 1957. These students were not expected to obtain professional employment, and their number constituted a mere 5 % of overall enrolment. In 1967, King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah admitted 30 part-time female students (as against 68 males). In 1968, Imam Mohammad Bin Saud Islamic University opened its doors to women on a part-time (irregular) basis, and the number of students was a grand total of 2!

In the first development plan (1969–1975), it was clear that the major administrative objective was to expand opportunities for female education at all levels from primary school to university, while taking more care to improve the quality of institutes of education and to upgrade the efficiency of their educational programmes. By 1975, the percentage of females joining universities had increased to 14 % of the total number of Saudi students. With the increase of graduates from secondary schools, the percentage of Saudi female students in universities reached more than 60 % of the total number of students.

As the educational needs for both men and women spread, the need emerged for coordinated efforts between the two bodies supervising boys' and girls' education, so a Royal Decree was issued for merging the General Presidency for Girls' Education with the Ministry of Education on 25 March 2002.

By far the most ambitious move to date has been the creation of Riyadh Women's University, later renamed Princess Noura Bent Abdul Rahman. As the result of a Royal Decree in 2006, 23 girls' colleges in Riyadh were amalgamated to form this university. In 2007, a further Royal Decree approved the establishment of the Faculty of Science, Faculty of Computer and Information Sciences and Faculty of Business and Management, as well as the College of Pharmacy, the Faculty of Nursing, the Faculty of Physical Therapy and the College of Kindergartens in each of the Riyadh and Dwadmi locations and the Faculty of Language and Interpretation in the city of Riyadh. Princess Johara Bent Fahad Al Saud was appointed as the Director of Princess Noura Bent Abdul Rahman University on 13 April 2007. She is the first Saudi woman to hold such a high-level position in the Kingdom. Princess Noura University, operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Higher Education, was honoured by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz, who laid the university's foundation stone.

The increasing number of colleges (34 in total) affiliated to Princess Noura Bent Abdul Rahman University has led to the creation of satellites all over the provinces of the capital, Riyadh. As a result of this expansion, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques agreed, in 2008, to transfer the supervision of 21 colleges from Princess Noura Bent Abdul Rahman University to King Saud University. These colleges were located in the provinces outside the city of Riyadh and in a subsidiary of the Riyadh region.

The question we have is whether the enormous amount of money devoted to Princess Noura University advantages women or further entrenches their subordination. Broadly speaking, the advantage is clearly that women can express themselves and voice their educational questions and opinions freely within a setting devoted only to women: in a shared situation, many women would be inculturated to remain

silent. The disadvantage of gender-segregated education is that women emerging from such a setting are not equipped to conduct themselves in employment settings populated by both men and women. Also, as a cultural symbol, the establishment of an all-women's university further entrenches the notion that women should be cloistered from men. Our role is not to judge this cloistering as a social practice – every culture in the world has its own practices which are part of the religious and social beliefs that underpin society – but simply to document some of the effects of segregation and to suggest ways of achieving professional excellence across the genders. Specific issues will be addressed below.

Male/Female Numbers in the HE Sector: Teachers and Students

From 1990 to 2004, female enrolments in Saudi Arabian universities saw an astonishing 512 % growth rate – one of the highest worldwide – compared to a male enrolment growth rate of 339.2 %. At the graduate studies level, the female enrolment rate in Saudi higher education is among the highest in the world at 48 %, compared to 50 % for the USA and the Western European group. In disciplines such as health sciences (48 %) and Humanities and Arts (55 %), female enrolments are just below the global mean, a huge development given the fact that this escalation has occurred entirely within the last 20 years.

Between 1990 and 2009, money has been poured into the higher education sector, enabling a remarkable rise of more than 175 % in the number of faculty members in universities in Saudi Arabia. The rate of increase for female faculty over this time was 242 %, significantly higher than the increase for male faculty members (152 %).

There is most evidently, therefore, an increasing chance for Saudi women to participate in university teaching, despite the fact that, notwithstanding the acceleration in female hiring, the number of male faculty members is currently almost twice the number of their female counterparts (in 2009, there were 27,488 male academics compared with 14,401 female academics). Given that women now represent more than 60 % of the total number of Saudi university students, there is evidently a significant imbalance in the staff/student ratio in the women's sections of universities compared to the men's. This imbalance needs to be redressed in one of two ways in order to secure, and maintain, quality of teaching: (1) if plans for the higher education sector include maintenance of a high level of male/female segregation, more female teaching appointments need to be made, and (2) if there are plans across the sector to integrate male/female education, teaching appointments need not be strategically gender-specific; however, in this instance, they still need to be weighted towards females in order to have the number of female teachers in the higher education sector approach the male representation.

The Question of Gender Segregation: Challenges and Suggestions

While the inclusion of both male and female education under the Ministry's umbrella in 2002 was an important step in the educational system, the continued segregation of the genders gives rise to challenges that continually need to be addressed. On one hand, some international studies have suggested that gender-segregated education produces enhanced motivation for both boys and girls. In general, however, for boys in the Kingdom, segregated learning reinforces gendered beliefs that women are subordinate, holding back a general understanding of the value of education for their female counterparts. Further, girls are impeded by their parents' continued tendency to prepare them for the primary expectation of an appropriate marriage (in many cases – particularly in rural areas – this is still considered to be more important than the capacity for a girl to earn her own living). This parental expectation, combined with the government provision of a stipend for university study (a provision that goes back to the 1970s), encourages many girls to accept the course books sent over from the men's side of segregated universities and to motivate themselves only to achieve pass level en route to making a good marriage.

We suggest a number of initiatives to help address these issues:

1. In gender-segregated universities as well as in gender-integrated universities, women must have an input into curriculum planning and implementation. There must be a direct line of communication across the whole institution for both male and female deans and heads of department.
2. Gender-segregated universities must provide a process for course/programme moderation: in this process, course curricula, as well as results, would be moderated across both sides of the institution as well as between male/female departments and between institutions.
3. Gender-segregated universities should provide equal library and on-line research access for women and men. At present, library and on-line research facilities available to female students and staff are generally demonstrably inferior to those available to males.
4. Strategic planning must allow for direct discussion across a university between men and women, relating to their parallel course content, curricula and programme offerings. (If not face-to-face, this discussion can be permitted via video- or teleconferencing. In this context, it would also be useful in the beginning at least to have two international consultants, one female and one male, to assist with the moderation process – preferably colleagues who have an ease of intercultural communication and, above all, who know and respect the Saudi system.)
5. Students from gender-segregated universities should be provided with specific education with respect to the conditions and requirements of study overseas, so that their expectations are appropriate to the new and more liberal conditions under which they will avail themselves of government funding opportunities.

6. There needs to be expanded opportunities for women in medical and scientific centres in the rural areas, where, because of the physical separation of women from men, medical doctor trainees, for instance, have some limitations on the amount of practical training they can get in hospitals. The goal is to have women emerge from their training with as much professional experience as possible, while still respecting the cultural and religious sensitivities of the region.
7. It would be ideal to have an annual review that catalogues developments in women's education and assesses challenges that arise within specific university contexts. Such a review might be conducted within the auspices of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Studies (CHERS), preferably including an international consultant to ensure credibility and transparency of the findings and analyses. The review would not only report progress but would make constructive suggestions for solving issues and concerns as well as suggested a strategy for future activity.

Overseas Scholarships

According to the current education policy for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the state is responsible for funding education, and education is free for all citizens and residents in all of its stages. The state budget for general education has more than trebled in the last 30 years. In addition, the present King, Abdullah Bin Aziz, has championed the availability of state-funded overseas scholarships. More than 20 % of those students benefiting from overseas scholarship programmes are women, who often accompany their husbands on overseas study programmes and end up enrolling in degrees themselves as a way of occupying their time and seeking out company in a foreign culture. Such enrolments can, and do, turn into useful degrees, equipping women to compete in the professional sector upon their return to the Kingdom. There are also (a smaller number of) women who take the initiative to avail themselves of overseas appointments and whose husbands accompany them to foreign universities.

We are yet to get comparative figures on the rate of female and male attrition in overseas study situations, as the initiative is so new: but anecdotal evidence does suggest that a woman who enrolls because she is accompanying her husband overseas does better than a man in the same situation. From this anecdotal evidence, we infer that cultural norms have a part to play: traditionally a woman has facilitated her husband's advancement rather than the reverse, so it is often emotionally challenging for a husband to uproot himself for the sake of his wife's education, and his own overseas postgraduate study in many cases reflects his sense of dislocation and identity challenge. We suggest that there be programmes established to prepare all potential overseas students not only for study situations but also for the social environment in which they will be living and studying. As part of this process, we suggest that all potential students, before securing funding from the Ministry, should outline in detail their proposed programme of study as well

as the requirements for successful completion. Further, because much is to be learned through the process of reflection, research degree proposals should include a proposed conference or meeting, in the foreign location or within the Kingdom within 6 months of return, at which research findings will be presented. Coursework masters students should outline plans for the professional application of their degree upon returning home.

Diploma Degrees

There remains one further issue to explore, which spreads across both women's and men's education and requires a rethinking of current strategy. This concerns the status of diploma degrees in the Kingdom, in which enrolment has increased moderately (since 2000, diploma enrolment across the board has less than doubled for women and a little more than doubled for men). The diploma degree in Saudi Arabia provides equivalent (indeed, almost the same) subjects to those taught at university level. These subjects are not as deeply or comprehensively covered as at university level, and the diploma courses are typically completed within 4–5 semesters. There is a wide choice in diploma studies, *but not for girls* – girls can enrol in medical science, natural science, economics, social sciences, information technology and media studies at the diploma level, but *not* in engineering, education, agricultural science, Islamic studies or law. Naturally, then, the rate at which diploma enrolment for women can increase is limited by the narrow range of fields in which they are permitted to enrol.

The limitations imposed on female enrolment in diploma degrees have had the effect of counterbalancing the enrolment at university level: since in several fields there is no choice but to enrol in the university sector, girls are of course enrolling in universities. Additionally, the provision of a government stipend for university enrolment (and not for diploma enrolment) gives extra encouragement for girls to enrol in the university sector. The government's wish to increase access to and participation in higher education is laudable – but we suggest that the Ministry consider how they want the Kingdom overall to be staffed and serviced. The limitation of diploma studies for girls, and the financial privileging of university students over diploma students, will inevitably lead to a further increase in the number of workers brought in from outside the Kingdom to fill positions emergent from the more practically focused diploma degrees. This has an impact on the cultural cohesiveness of the Kingdom. The impact can be positive – new perspectives, new visions for relationships between work and family – as well as negative, fewer people sharing cherished cultural and religious values, but will definitely make for change. The Ministry should give careful consideration to the financial privileging of university over diploma study, perhaps expanding the provision of diploma studies for girls and broadening the stipend system beyond the university sector.

Conclusion

Over the last 20 years in particular, Saudi Arabia has witnessed a rapid and impressive journey towards women's participation in all levels of the education sector. But this journey is only partially completed: there is quite some way to go. The progressive facts and data cited in our chapter illustrate the part of the journey that is quantifiable and, to a large extent, successful. There are many aspects of this journey, however, that are no less important for being less accessible via facts and figures. There are also parts of the journey yet to be embarked upon, and still other parts that need still to be successfully mapped within the complex religious and ideological terrain of Saudi Arabian culture.