

A Role and Contributions of Women in the Sultanate of Oman

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Abstract

Over the last 4 decades, when His majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said began the process of Renaissance in Sultanate of Oman, Women are encouraged to work shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts. This paper presents an overview of the various factors that have encouraged the Omani women to pursue their careers, like support of women from the Islam religion and the Holy Quran, the wise leadership of His Majesty under which thrust has been given to education and Omanization, setting up of Women's Association and favorable labor laws etc. It highlights the roles and contributions of Omani women in the Sultanate where Omani women today are found in responsible positions like Ministerial post, health, Education, banks and other leading sectors. It also analyses the obstacles hindering their progress and suggests recommendation for facilitating the Omani women to participate in all aspects for their nation's growth.

Keywords: Omani women, Islam, Education, Omanization, Leadership, Oman labour law, Work life Conflict, Economic growth and diversification

1. Introduction

After the accession of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said in 1970 Oman transformed from a rudimentary single economy that lacked all sorts of public amenities and modern infrastructure to a modern and diversified economy aided by the wise leadership of His Majesty. The availability of oil revenues and the importance given to education in the post 1970 period accelerated the development process.

For women in Oman, the new era started when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said began the process of Renaissance. The result seen today is because of his firm belief in the future of Oman and its men and women. Women are encouraged to work shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts.

The progress of Omani women can be gauged by the fact that they are entering various professions and most importantly some women are occupying eminent positions in the public sector and defence. While there are no official figures available, it is said that Oman has the highest number of working women among the AGCC states. (Oman Tribune, 30 September 2007)

2. Purpose of the study

This conceptual paper addresses the following issues:

- Factors that encourage women to pursue various careers.
- Role and contributions of Omani women in the Sultanate.
- Obstacles hindering women's progress.
- Recommendations

3. Factors that encourage women to pursue various careers

Factors which encourage women to work and achieve economic independence and leave a significant mark on the society are mainly: support of women from the Islam religion and the Holy Quran, the wise leadership of His Majesty under which thrust has been given to education and Omanisation, setting up of Women's Association and favorable labor laws.

3.1 Rights of women as stated in Islam

Men and women are accorded equal rights in Islam. Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) wives Khadijah and Aisha have inspired female education in Islamic world. Sitna Khadijah was a successful business woman .She is looked up as a role model for women. Aisha was a military leader and a renowned Hadith scholar.

Men and women were encouraged alike to seek and pursue knowledge by Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). The Holy Quranic verses and Hadiths can be cited to demonstrate this fundamental right to knowledge. Qur'an encourages the pursuit of knowledge by all Muslims regardless of their sex. It repeatedly commands all believers to read, to recite, to think, to contemplate, as well as to learn from the signs of God surrounding us in nature. In fact, the very first revelation to Prophet Muhammad was "READ" Islam does not put any limit on the kind or field of education a woman may choose. Islamic history still has the mark of few women scholars "The search for knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, male and female" (Hadith) (Salma M.Al Lamki, 1999)

3.2 Role of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has always felt that since women form half of our society education of girls should never be absent from our mind. Rapid strides in educational development were taken after His Majesty Sultan Qaboos assumed power in 1970. This has directly effected the growth in women employment both in the Public and Private Sector.

The Table shows increase in working women both in Public and Private sector. The Government under the leadership of His Majesty has accorded support and encouragement to the working women. It has tackled the impediments by providing the necessary social infrastructure and thus cleared the way for their progress in the society.

Insert table 1 here

3.3 Omanisation

Omanisation Policy was introduced in 1988 as a long-term process of committed vision and mission. This is a key development policy influencing the employment scenario of the country. Omanisation plan is seen as a national objective in order to stop the continuation of the country's dependence on the expatriate manpower by substituting Omani nationals for foreign labour.

According to this it is stated that preference is given to Omani Nationals by the legislation concerning employment contained in the Omani Labour Law. It specifies the ratio of Omanisation to be achieved in the private sector considering the number of Omani graduates graduating annually from the various educational institutes The Omani graduates includes many women.

Oman Ministry of manpower is in process of generating new job opportunities for Omani women in diverse areas to join the labour market and efficiently contribute to social and economic welfare. Ministry will implement vocational training in several areas that would result in creation of many occupations for women

3.4 Education

Educational progress has been phenomenal under the reign of His Majesty. Modern education was not known in Oman before 1940. The most common form of education was the kuttab, the traditional Islamic method where a group of boys and girls were taught to recite the Quran, and sometimes learned basic writing and arithmetical skills .This kind of education took place in mosque, or in houses or under trees. This type of education depended most of the time on the one person who taught a group of students. There were no organized class rooms, no chairs and well defined text books apart from the Quran. The primary aim of the Kuttab was to memorize the Quran and to interpret religion

Rapid strides in educational development were taken after His Majesty Sultan Qaboos assumed power in 1970.The Table below shows the growth in the Number of schools, Total Number of students and proportion of girls since 1970. There is a growth since 1970 from 0% to 49%.It is thus seen that women's education is focused and education have enhanced the role of women in Oman

Women have an equal access to educational opportunities. For the academic year 2008-2009, 275,229 males and 265,103 females were enrolled in Government schools for general education. In the same year, 7,298 female students were enrolled in Sultan Qaboos University and Colleges of Applied Sciences. For the New Year 2009-2010, 4,033 female students are enrolled as new admissions in Sultan Qaboos University and Colleges of Applied Sciences which is very close to the number of enrollments of the opposite gender. (Ministry of National Economy, 2009). It is thus seen that women's education is focused. It enhances their role in the Sultanate.

Insert table 2 here

3.5 Role of Support Services

The Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs plays an important role in the development of women. They offer various services ranging from literacy programmes to training women in skills which will enable self employment and self sufficiency. Omani Women's Association was founded in 1971 and is managed as a not-for-profit organization. The Omani Women's Association acts in collaboration with the Government to carry out a number of activities such as literacy classes, provision of handicrafts skills and family care programmes. It is envisaged that the Women's Association could be instrumental to offer the much needed support for the development of Omani women in the workplace.

Decent Work Country Programme will be implemented during the period 2010-2013 and will rely on a set of priorities agreed between the International Labour Organization, the Government of Oman and Social Partners to enhance decent and productive job opportunities for women in conditions, freedom, justice and dignity. The Sultanate of Oman becomes the second Gulf state to sign its DWCP after Bahrain in March 2010.

These programmes enhance the role of Omani women in Sultanate.

3.6 Women's Leadership

American Embassies and few UN organizations have small programmes focusing on women training in Leadership Skills and provide capacity building for local groups.

Shell Oil Company through its Intilaquah (Arabic for 'rapid take off') helps young women entrepreneur professionalize the operations of their start up business by providing them with training, counseling and consultancy services. (Man and woman, 2009; MONE Publication) 41.9% women (Omanis and Expatriates) (Ministry of National Economy, 2009) are employed in civil services out of which the major share is of the Omani women. Further to the directives of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, nine Omani women are appointed to senior government decision making positions.

3.7 Economic growth and diversification

Oman has developed its economy, educated its people and has relatively comfortable standard of living due to its dependence on the availability of oil revenues. However, now the Government of Oman has been pursuing economic diversification so as to achieve sustainable economic growth.

The Government of Oman identified the role of liberalization and privatization to accelerate the rate of economic growth. The country's fifth five year plan 1996-2000 highlighted the importance of participation of Omani women in private sector development.

In the 6th five year plan 2001-2005 the ministry of manpower set up SANAD programme, though not specifically targeted to women, 37% of funds were provided to women in 2002-2004. With the economic growth, liberalization and diversification more job opportunities are created enabling women to make their contributions.

3.8 Labor Laws pertaining to women

Labor Laws are favorable to Omani women. Oman Labour Law ensures gender equality through equal opportunity and equal pay act. For example, Articles 80 to 82 in the Oman Labor Law clearly safeguard the rights and working conditions of Omani women.

Women can avail special leaves such as maternity leave and leave upon death of husband (Article 67 Oman Labour Law) Working mothers who return to work while continuing to breast feed are allowed to leave work an hour early each day for six months to feed their babies.

The working hours in the Government (public) sector are conducive to working women. Government employees work from 7:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. Saturday through Wednesday, and Thursday and Friday are days off from work. Such working hours allow parents, particularly working mothers, to spend time with their children.

With all the above factors, Omani women have occupied different professions and have contributed to the progress of society.

4. Role and contributions of Omani women in the Sultanate

Today Omani women are in key positions starting at the ministerial posts. Dr Rawiyah bint Saud Al Busaidiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Dr Rajiha Bint, Abdulmir bint Ali, Minister of Tourism, Dr Shariffa bint Khalfan Al Yahya, Minister of Social Development, Sheikha Aisha bint Khalfan Al Siyabiya, Chairperson of Public Authority for Craft Industry, all hold crucial portfolios. (Essa Bin Mohammed Al Zedjali, 2009)

At all levels women are found to hold responsible positions today. Health, Education, banks are the leading sectors. Omani women are active voters as well as candidates who have served terms in the Majlis A'shura. The Majlis A'shuras members represent the Sultanates wilayats. Omani women exercising their voting rights prove their equal status. Omani women membership of the Majlis A'Shura dates from 1994. (Essa Bin Mohammed Al Zedjali, 2009)

Omani women are also represented at Diplomatic Circle as His Majesty appointed the first woman ambassador by appointing her as Ambassador to the Netherlands in September 1999.

In the Legal arena also a growing presence of women is seen. In April 2009 first Omani woman was appointed as Director of Public Prosecution, Directorate in the Wilayat of Barkha.

Women have served in the ROP for over 35 years and their contribution is growing with new development and experience. Women Police Traffic Patrols are introduced which is in its first phase now that is limited to the Governorate of Muscat.

In the field of Fine Arts, Omani women have been reaching out to international audience. Works of Omani female artists, artisans, sculptress, and photographers have been around to other countries for exhibitions. Omani actresses have won accolades for their performance on stage and screen.

The Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra has harnessed the talent of some wonderful female musicians. During 2007-08 the Royal Oman Symphony Orchestra and Syria's Mari Orchestra with Maestro Raad Khalaf performed a joint concert featuring 50 female musicians - the first time an event of this kind has been staged in the Gulf.

Dr Mariam Al Waili is a Senior Specialist in Nutritional Medicine. She feels that Health sector is a suitable place for women to play their essential role in society. There are more opportunities available than even before and a high demand for qualified and skilled practitioners. Due to the dramatic rise of several diets related chronic diseases, she dreams to see specialized Nutritional Medicine and Education Centers in the country that can provide adequate treatment and cost effective supplements. (Essa Bin Mohammed Al Zedjali, 2009)

Her Highness Sayyida Zeyana Ali Al said is an Air Traffic Controller (ATC) for the last 14 years. She was selected to study in UK and underwent all the 4 stages of training in Air Traffic Control. According to her, the two qualities in an ATC would require is multi tasking and quick thinking. She needed to work in shift, needed a lot of focus to talk to pilots at the same time, keep abreast of information of all aircrafts and work harder to make Air traffic less congested. She thanks His Majesty Sultan Qaboos to have given women a chance to prove their capabilities in all of these careers.

Barka Al Barky studied Social Science and after her post graduation moved to Oman in 1976. She took up employment with UN Development Programme and worked till 1993. She helped in development and coordinating UN Agencies' contribution to Omani development efforts in all fields of economy from fisheries, agriculture, industrial planning, tourism, civil aviation and meteorology systems. She was the Director of Administration and Personnel at Al Shatti Hospital. In the last 3 years she is mainly supporting the blind community across Oman.

Ahlam Al Jahdhami is an Engineer who is today Sales and Client Support Manager at Falcon Oilfield Services (National Wireline Logging Company). She provides hi-tech exploration and production services to oil companies in the region. After a degree in Biomedical Engineering she wanted a career as a real engineer. Opportunities in the region were limited. There were very few female engineers and she was one of the first Omani women to survive in this environment. The sharp end of the oil industry is never described as woman friendly or even just friendly. It is still a very male dominated and conservative business. She was working and sometimes living in remote camps or on offshore rigs kilometers away from the comforts of home. The work was very physical and set in some of the harshest environments on earth. However, she wants to continue to share her passion for science and engineering and encourage more young women to get involved and contribute in a real and practical way. (Essa Bin Mohammed Al Zedjali, 2009)

Dr. Wafaa Al Harasy is a consultant and director of the ROP Forensic Laboratory. She did her B.Sc in Egypt and completed her M.Sc and P.hd in United Kingdom. Practically Forensic work is mostly a man's world. There are

times when the Forensic team is required to attend crime scenes at unsocial hours of the day and at isolated locations.

But she enjoys her job because of these daily challenges and considers herself lucky not only to be part of this specialized skilled team but also one of the founders of this profession in Oman. She wants to be able to contribute to Oman and have a state of art Forensic laboratory and achieve an international recognition for its services.

Maliha Al Kharoussi is an E business entrepreneur and CEO of Arabian booking.net a new resource for business, leisure and family travelers. She wishes to add value to the core industries that all use i.e. hospitality, travel and tourism. By bringing these 3 major sectors in one easy to access and use website she will help those who want value for money in quickest possible way. She wishes to help and strengthen Oman as leading tourism destination in areas of regular tourism, medical tourism, cultural tourism and adventure tourism.

Ghada Al Harthy is the proprietor of café G Patisserie & Café G Catering. From aviation to catering she wanted a career, not just a job. She strongly feels that business has no gender. As long as the business is legal and ethical there is nothing to stop us from achieving the goals. She believes that under the wise leadership of His Majesty who has a strong advocate for women in business, we are amongst the most fortunate in the Gulf as far as equal opportunities are concerned. (Essa Bin Mohammed Al Zedjali, 2009)

The opportunities are endless. But there is more to be achieved and that is why His Majesty is initiating different measures towards the advancement of women in Oman. However there are various factors that are still hindering the progress of Omani women.

5. Obstacles hindering women's progress

5.1 Traditional mindset of Arab men

A major barrier to Oman's progress is the conservative mind set of the Arab men. (Salma M.Al Lamki, 1999). They believe that women are inferior and it is their responsibility to provide physical and economic security. This attitude prevails at the work place whereby the male colleagues feel that their counterparts are not equally capable and do not delegate responsible and important tasks to them. (Hammoud, R. S., 1993 & Beck, L, 1994). This dampens their morale and spirit and demotivates them. This negative attitude and traditional stereotype towards women in Arab/Islamic societies has been, and still is, a major resisting force to progress for professional working women.

5.2 Self-image of Women

The inferior self-image of women becomes difficult to overcome considering that it is ingrained and conditioned in their upbringing and social development (Hennig M & Jardim A. 1977; Hunsaker, J., & Hunsaker, P 1991). In traditional Arab-Islamic patriarchal societies, the feminine gender is subordinate, while the masculine is superior and dominant (Maghrabi, A, Al-Dabbagh, H. & Hayajneh, A, 1994; Allaghi, F., & Alman, A, 1984; Gerner, D. J, 1984 & Al-Hatimy, S.A, 1983). Generally, men are held responsible for providing the necessities of life, thus to work outside the home. On the other hand, women are expected to serve their husbands and children at home, especially since women are not required by the Islamic law (Shari'a) to financially support the family. In this subordinate position, women become victims of their own gender (Mernissi, F, 1985; Rassam, A, 1984). Thus the women themselves think they are incapable of being socially and financially independent and hence this hinders the progress for professional working women.

5.3 Human Resource Policies and Strategies

The unavailability of structured human resource policies and strategies addressing women workers has proven to be a major obstacle to women's progress and development. The majority of these workers are concentrated in the lower positions in the organizational hierarchy with a small percentage in decision making positions. 12,072 out of 51,229 Omani employees in the wage group of Omani Rials 120 were Omani women, followed by the Omani Rials 200-300 bracket in which 3349 Omani women are employed out of a total of 15,665 local workers in that bracket. Only 25 Omani Women fall in the wage group of Omani Rials 2000 plus + in the private sector out of a total of 589. (Ministry of National Economy, 2009)

Omani women face gender discrimination at the time of recruitment owing to the absence of relevant human resource policies and strategies which promote employment for women. This acts as a 'glass ceiling' preventing women's accessibility to any top management positions. For example, there are no programs to facilitate the advancement of women as role models, absence of mentoring programmes, lack of management training programs, and shunning of affirmative action.

5.4 Lack of Professional Women's Network

The lack of a professional women's network in Oman creates a major void for women aspiring to professional managerial positions. The absence of female mentor-protégé, relationship makes it difficult for women to develop the requisite attitude, skills and abilities for leadership and management positions. (Salma M. Al Lamki, 1999). This results in a disparate situation and a state of confusion; because after all, women are entering a male dominated domain coupled with a traditional value system and a culture that tends to shun women from pursuing management careers.

5.5 Work Family Conflict

There is an interdependence of work and family life which is especially problematic for women as a result of their greater family responsibilities. Traditionally, women have had the primary responsibility for housekeeping and childcare which do not diminish when they are employed outside the home. Furthermore, the responsibilities they carry are simultaneous while men's are more typically sequential i.e. a woman may be called in at work regarding a sick child whereas typically a father may fulfill role obligations after work hours.

6. Recommendations

The hindrances should be tackled efficiently from all angles like government, organization and the individual. In Oman the availability and accessibility to all levels of education along with equal opportunities in the job market is more so in the urban area. In the rural interiors the importance given to education takes a back seat and therefore the opportunities to be gainfully employed in the job market is relatively less? Thus it is important to ensure that rural areas should be focused for literacy campaigns. It is urged that educational opportunities to Omani women should never be compromised, but rather be improved. Meanwhile, special measures should be undertaken to encourage and promote women's access to scientific, managerial, technical, and vocational disciplines in order to develop the requisite skills and extend their opportunities for employment in non-traditional occupations.

It is necessary to institute awareness programmes of employment opportunities and benefits to Omani women in all the different regions of Oman so that their participation in workforce will further increase. This can be achieved through the utilization of the local and international media as a means for promoting the role of working women in the workplace and the values of Arab women in changing society and their integration in the development process. Other measures include setting up quota systems to ensure the employment and representation of women in the workforce.

Since the Omani society is based on strong family ties the centrality of the family accompanied by close relationship makes it the responsibility for parents and parents in law of working women to help with child care. However it is recommended that the organizations and government also take the responsibility of family support and child care services and special attention is directed to the provision of a social infrastructure that will enable women to work, such as professional day care centers on site, kindergartens and adequate maternity leave. The availability of such support services is a tangible expression of organizational recognition of the needs of professional women. Consequently, it undoubtedly can make a great difference to the capacity of women to manage multiple roles.

It is very important that Omani women should think positive about them first and convince others that they are empowered and deserve to be trust worthy.

Ghada Al Harthy proprietor of cafe, G Patisserie and cafe, G Catering says "I hope to one day fund and support my own training facilities for younger generation of Omanis so that they may also have a brighter future ahead of them. I also want to start new business ventures that will allow me to create career opportunities for the blind and disabled members of our society. We can all make a positive change starting with our thoughts which lead to our actions."(Essa Bin Mohammed Al Zedjali, 2009.)

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said has always emphasized the importance of the woman's role in the country's growth. His majesty has called upon female citizens to lend their full support to the continuing development of their country, frequently describing them as representing "half of Oman's potential." (Dr. Linda Pappas Funsch, 2006)

"Many years ago I said that if the energy, capability and enthusiasm of women were excluded from a country's active life, then that country would be depriving itself of 50 percent of its genius. I have taken very good care that this should not happen to Oman, and I look forward to the further progress of women in my country with the greatest pleasure and confidence."

Underscoring the expanded role that women would inevitably play in Omani society, Sultan Qaboos draws on Islamic teachings to emphasize his support for women's rights.

He condemns those who would relegate women to subservient positions in society and, instead, invites women to assume myriad responsibilities in the development of their country. (Dr. Linda Pappas Funsch, 2006)

Omani women, are thus encouraged by their monarch's commitment to national welfare, and are now mobilized eager to participate in all aspects of their nation's growth.

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Table 1. Women working in Public and Private Sector

Year	Government	Private
1995	12193	3632
1996	12350	4435
1997	13024	5329
1998	14560	7602
1999	16502	8750
2000	18641	10048
2001	20946	10903
2002	24064	12093
2003	27213	13385
2004	29997	14695
2005	32566	16625
2006	35804	19564
2007	39957	23105
2008	43204	26632

Source: (Statistical year book 2009)

Table 2. Number of schools and female students in Oman
(Period 1970 onwards)

Year	No. of schools	No. of students	No. of girls	Proportion of girls (%)
1969-70	3	909	-	-
1980/1981	373	106,032	35,190	33
1995/1996	953	488,797	236,331	48
2001	993	554,845	270,344	49
2003	1,022	576,472	279,180	48
2005-2006	1031	596,257	288,045	48
2007	1055	554,289	271,602	49
2008	1050	541,482	265,326	49
2009	1,043	531,283	260,329	49

Source: Ministry of Education 2002a; Statistics provided by Shapour Rassekh