

Saudi Arabian Women More Educated Than Men Are Wasted Resource
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By Donna Abu-Nasr

June 5 (Bloomberg) -- When Saudi recruiter Tariq Alkahily interviews female job applicants, one of the first questions they usually ask is: Will I be required to mix with men at work?

In a country where the sexes are strictly segregated in schools, restaurants and other public places, many women are apprehensive about working in offices where they'll be in close proximity to men, Bloomberg Markets will report in its July issue.

So Alkahily, founder of OilWell7.com company, created a chart that has four classifications, along with a corresponding image, to explain the extent of workplace gender mixing:

segregated; semisegregated, which shows a man and a woman in different boxes denoting separate work quarters; unsegregated conservative, with a man and a woman in the same box but separated by a long distance; and unsegregated relaxed, where men and women toil side by side.

"If a woman wants to enter the job market, she must be able to go and work with men," Alkahily, 31, says. "Those who want a female la-la land -- where the customers are female, the suppliers are female, the marketing department is female, and everything is female -- it won't happen." According to a November survey taken by his company, 46 percent of women seeking jobs are looking for the most relaxed environment.

Opportunities Increasing

As Saudi women take jobs that were previously not open to them, they're creating a new workplace dynamic in the country.

More Saudis now accept the idea of women working in jobs such as law or real estate. Employers who see the benefits of hiring women are adjusting their workplaces to accommodate them, adding women's restrooms or creating separate entrances and work spaces for them.

Women who've been raised separately from men outside their immediate family are learning that it's OK to interact with them on the job.

King Abdullah, who's ruled Saudi Arabia since 2005, has been slowly expanding rights for women despite resistance from some segments of the religious establishment.

Even the world's largest oil exporter can't afford to keep women at home forever, says David Butter, Middle East analyst and associate fellow at foreign policy research group Chatham House in London.

'A Luxury'

"It's a luxury that can be afforded, but this could very easily be undermined by a change in some of the external variables and even some of the internal variables," he says.

Since the Arab Spring began two years ago, the king has sped up the changes. He granted women the right to vote and run in the 2015 municipal elections -- the only such contest the kingdom holds - - allowed two women to compete in last year's London Olympics, a first for Saudi female athletes, and in January appointed the first female members to the Consultative Council, naming 30 women to the 150-member advisory body.

Before 2011, Abdullah opened the first coeducational university and named the first Saudi female deputy minister. The king has also created job opportunities for women in areas other than those they have traditionally held in academia, medicine and health.

Women can now work in lingerie and makeup stores, as supermarket cashiers and as quality managers at factories.

Women's universities have also expanded areas of study available to female students, adding law and architecture, for instance.

'Underutilized Resource'

Saudi women have always been "a hugely underutilized resource," Butter says. An increasing proportion of Saudi Arabian oil is being consumed domestically, meaning there will be less for export.

"If you're going to re-balance the Saudi economy so that it is viable in the long term to not depend on increasing oil revenue year on year, there are certain things that need to be done, and one of those is bringing women into the labor force," he says.

More women are working than ever before -- a total of 647,000 in 2012, up from 505,000 in 2009, according to the country's Central Department of Statistics and Information.

"The number is minuscule, but it is a significant increase," says Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, an economist and an assistant secretary-general for negotiations and strategic dialogue at the Gulf Cooperation Council. Just 10 percent of Saudi women over the age of 15 are employed, one of the lowest rates in the world.

Outnumbering Men

Yet women outnumber men in higher education: Some 59,948 women received postsecondary degrees in 2009 compared with 55,842 men, according to the Education Ministry.

"It is a big loss for a country that's suffering a labor shortage," Aluwaisheg says. "A lot of opportunities are being lost for Saudi Arabia by not employing more university graduates" while it hires foreign workers to do jobs that women could fill, he adds.

The changes that Abdullah has introduced still leave Saudi Arabia decades behind Western countries in terms of opportunities for women, in part because the country's religious leaders enforce restrictions interpreted from the Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam.

"Change here comes from the top -- unlike in countries that have witnessed an Arab Spring -- and the resistance comes from segments of the people," says Mohammed al-Zulfa, a former Consultative Council member who touched off a fierce controversy in 2005 when he asked fellow councilmen to study the possibility of allowing women over the age of 35 or 40 to drive.

Permission Needed

Women in Saudi Arabia need permission from a mahram, or a male guardian, to get an education or to travel and for some medical treatments. The guardians are notified via text message every time their female dependents leave the country.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said in a December report that Saudi women are still treated as "legal minors, no matter how old they are." Adds Hussa al-Ghanem, a retired educator, "If a woman is 70 and her closest male relative is her grandson, he becomes her guardian and he will get the message. That is so degrading."

One thing women no longer need a guardian's permission for -- since 2011 -- is to work, says Tala al-Hejailan, a 28-year-old lawyer who co-founded HelpingHands KSA, a charity that assists orphans and widows.

Even so, only one stratum of women can really take advantage of that freedom, she says. "What if she cannot afford a driver?" al-Hejailan says. "You've taken away one obstacle, but she still can't move freely."

Social Media

Some Saudi women have spoken out or used social media to push for more freedoms. "If there hadn't been strong internal female voices persistently calling for change, we wouldn't have come this far," says Hatoun al-Fassi, a Saudi academic and women's historian.

Segregated once they hit puberty, Saudis sometimes don't know how to have even a simple conversation with a member of the opposite sex. That can make a job interview awkward for both parties. "Confidence is an issue," says Sheikha al-Sudairy, employment project manager at Al-Nahda Philanthropic Society for Women, which has led efforts to find women jobs since 1995, even before laws were put in place. "At the same time, employers aren't used to interviewing women or even asking them questions."

Al-Nahda runs workshops in which young women are taught how to behave with a potential employer. The group also hosts interviews at its offices, with al-Sudairy -- and sometimes a girl's mom, too -- sitting in.

"When they do the interview here, it's a higher success rate," al-Sudairy says. Her group has helped find work for more than 3,000 women in Riyadh since 2003.

Separate Quarters

One employer who has found workers through Al-Nahda is Nawaf Abalkhail, general manager of factories and operations at Forsan Foods & Consumer Products Co., which has hired more than 35 women in its factories and offices since April 2012. The company put the women, who work in accounting, human resources and administration, in a separate office, installed a ladies' room and provided them with their own exit.

"This conservative environment has made everyone comfortable," he says.

Abalkhail asks female workers not to leave their quarters without their abayas, the black cloaks women are required to wear in public. "If a lady comes with makeup or a miniskirt and her perfume fills the corridors, will she contribute to a comfortable work environment?" he asks. "That won't be a healthy sight."

Higher Performance

Abalkhail says women tend to be more punctual and their performance is usually better. "You can have a higher probability to acquire a competent employee with the girls than the men," he says.

In fact, Abalkhail says he'd like to hire women to work in his company's gourmet food shops but can't because such jobs aren't open to women yet. "We hope that the cultural burden, the fear of hiring women in shops, will dissipate and society will start accepting them," he says.

Being a trailblazer has its pitfalls, as Moudi, a 35-year-old Saudi divorcee, learned recently. She had been "ecstatic"

when she found a job as a waitress at an Outback Steakhouse's family section, where women are allowed to dine with their guardians separately from the men-only section.

"Outback is working very hard to support the employment of Saudi women," says Ziad Kaddoura, managing partner at Hospitality Concepts & Solutions, which owns the Outback franchise in Saudi Arabia. "However, we are also respectful of the local culture."

Religious Police

"I would welcome the diners in English with, 'Hello, closed area, open area?'" says Moudi, who did not provide her last name for fear of reprisal. "My English improved, I made friends with the female diners, and I started to feel I can have ambitions."

Then the religious police, who are in charge of ensuring the genders are properly segregated, walked into the restaurant and banned her and two other female colleagues from waiting on customers, putting them out of work. "I wasn't doing anything wrong," says Moudi, who's dressed in a black abaya with a veil that falls over her eyes. "I'm lost without my job."

Kaddoura's company still employs about 20 women in retail stores and restaurants in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and in Jeddah, the country's second-largest city.

Start-Up Business

Some women are even setting up their own businesses. Lamy Altuwaijri got a loan of about 210,000 riyals (\$56,000) from the Prince Sultan Fund for Women's Development to set up a cake shop last year at a mall in the eastern city of al-Khobar.

In order to qualify for a loan, Altuwaijri, 49, had to take a two-week course that included tips on starting a business, reading a contract and doing the accounts.

"The fund's support allowed me to start the business a year earlier than I would've done," she says.

At a mall in Riyadh, Laila Fahd, a 23-year-old accountant at a hospital, says the new laws mean she can aim higher.

"People, especially men, used to think badly of female accountants because they work with men," says Fahd, a thick lock of hair dyed blond escaping from her black veil. "Now, I'm thinking of getting a B.A. in accounting because society's views are changing."

Sarah Mahmoud, a bubbly 18-year-old student with a nose ring, blue nail polish and green contact lenses shielding her brown eyes beneath her veil, says she's happy more opportunities are opening for women.

"When I get married, I want to be strong in the marriage, and that means having a job," she says at the mall's food court.

Mahmoud had just seen a married woman with children standing in line at KFC who was unable to respond to the Asian worker's hello. "She told me, 'By God, I don't know what "hello" means,'" Mahmoud says. "She appeared so weak. I don't want to be like her."

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