



Women in the Gulf

An EGIC Investigative Series

By Cinzia Bianco

Introduction

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC), while striving to develop a comprehensive outlook on the Arab Gulf region, is very interested in exploring the evolution of the political, economic and social lives, and roles, of women in the region.

An expansive gender divide within many Arab Gulf states is evident and many root causes — mainly revolving around cultural and social traditions — have been identified in the voluptuous body of literature focused on gender studies. However, in the context of fundamental reforms unfolding in the Arab Gulf, it is also clear that ascribed roles of women is rapidly undergoing considerable alteration and women are increasingly seen as active citizens making major contributions to the political, economic and social wellbeing of their community and state.

Significant differences do, of course, exist between each of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC). Some — re: Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain — have already undergone major reforms and have, for decades, had women appointed as Ministers of State and other representatives. Others — re: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait — there have long been more women than men in higher education and higher positions. Yet all the GCC states are scaling-up their efforts to create new spaces for their female citizens by confronting obstacles from within more conservative segments of society. The road is long but the GCC countries are definitively *en route*.

This series of ***Women in the Gulf*** will keep track of such changes as they happen. Building on the direct testimonies of women from the Gulf countries, the EGIC is committed to publishing: **interviews, analyses, commentaries, surveys** and **on-the-ground research** about the ever-changing role of women in the GCC.



In this, the first work addition to this series, we address the issue of **women in business in Saudi Arabia**. Almost a year has passed since the Saudi government published the recommendations of Vision 2030 to proactively promote entrepreneurship and increase the participation of women in the workforce by 20%. We will explore what has happened since then. To do so, the EGIC sat with Sara Alshareef, a PhD Candidate at Royal Holloway University in London in February 2017. Sara, a Saudi citizen herself, is wrapping up her research focusing on the opportunities and challenges faced by Saudi women entrepreneurs in starting a new business in the Kingdom. The research is based on extensive interviews and focus groups with Saudi female entrepreneurs inside the Kingdom and a smaller sample of interviews outside the Kingdom for comparison.

Here is what Sara had to say:

EGIC: Sara, first of all, thank you for agreeing to this interview. Your research obviously registers the transition between the pre and post Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia. The first question spontaneously is: did you find that there are many new businesses set up by women in the Kingdom?

Sara: Well, yes without a doubt we can say that private businesses in general is blossoming in the Kingdom, although most frequently we see very small start-ups and enterprises rather than large-scale operations. I have registered also a significant increase in businesses initiated by women. At the same time I think this trend started even before the publication of the Vision and it is then been further encouraged by it.

EGIC: What kind of sectors are most common among new businesses run by women?

Sara: I would say that the distinctive trait is that generally women prefer to set up business conceived for a female clientele. Women tend to prefer offering their services to other women. There is a growing interest in fashion, for example. Many young Saudi women work as fashion designers, or jewellery artists and open their own firms. Beauty centres are also quite common enterprises. Education is another very popular sector for new services firms: a number of women have started home-based consultancies or support services. I would say these are the most common sectors but there are interesting examples in various other contexts as well.

EGIC: You mentioned that women tend to prefer working with or for other women. How do the inter-gender interactions generally work out for Saudi female entrepreneurs? Are there difficulties in having, for example, a male business partner?

Sara: Let me start off by saying that there are no major restrictions imposed by policies or bureaucracy on men and women working together. At the same time when I came across a woman and a man being partners in an enterprise, in all cases the two were related by family ties. In other words, whenever there was a woman and a man working together in the management of a business, those were either close relatives (i.e. brother and sister) or married.

EGIC: Why do you think this was the case?

Sara: My conclusions were that it is a matter related to family restrictions and societal cultural traditions. Business partners usually spend a lot of time together, and even travel together. It is

tough for a conservative society like Saudi Arabia's to accept the idea of a woman, be she unmarried or married, spending a lot of time with a male business partner who is not related to her.

EGIC: How about the relationship between a female business owner and male employees?

Sara: I didn't find there were many challenges related to this. It is true that I haven't come across many instances of male employees working for women. The most common case is that of drivers, who most often come from foreign countries and, for this reason, don't fit into the overall cultural context.

EGIC: Let's speak of the challenges. During the course of your research, which challenge has emerged as the major one for women entrepreneurs?

Sara: Undoubtedly, family inferences. There are many misconceptions in the United Kingdom, where I have been living for long, and in the West in general about Saudi Arabia. The most common is that the major source of repression to the rights of Saudi women is the government. Actually, most often gender conservatism is rooted in the wider society and it is voiced often by individual families. Family is arguably the most important institution in the Kingdom. Parents have vast authority over their sons and even more on their daughters. Their expectations for the future and their model of an accomplished life are often different than their daughter's: the generation gap in Saudi Arabia is really significant. Many young Saudi women want to be financially independent and build something meaningful for themselves. Some of their parents would rather see them in the traditional role that culture has assigned to the female gender, at home. Once women embark into their new enterprises, they spontaneously are compelled to defy a number of the unwritten code that dictates what an appropriate behaviour looks like for a woman and this leads to intra-family conflicts and endless negotiations over daily tasks.

EGIC: How about their own, personal, challenges? There are self-imposed limitations of sort?

Sara: Yes, many of the women I interviewed told me that they are concerned that it would be harder for them to find a husband if they pursue alternative roles in society. Especially when leading a company, they are afraid that they would be perceived as "bossy," and that this would scare away potential husbands. Indeed, as many other women around the world they are also scared that they will have to choose between pursuing a career and having a family.

EGIC: In the end what are your personal thoughts as a Saudi citizen regarding the future of economic empowerment for Saudi women?

Sara: The women I interviewed are strong individuals that were sometimes not afraid to go against some unwritten rules and prejudices about how a female citizen might contribute to the growth of the Kingdom. They were able to overcome bureaucratic financial and cultural barriers to pursue their professional ambitions and their personal idea of accomplishment. I believe that this bodes well for the future of the country as a whole. In particular given that Saudi Arabia is undergoing a process of economic change that is focused on the diversification of the economy away from the energy sector and related activities, women can play a key part, as they are generally more

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interested in non-energy related businesses. The strength and determination of the new female entrepreneurs, if embraced and facilitated more by society, can indeed make a difference.

EGIC: Thank you very much Sara for your time and for sharing with us some of the findings of your academic research, which are very topical in the wider context of economic, political and societal developments in the Arab Gulf.