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## Saudi Universities Reach Toward Equality for Women

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It's a stifling evening in mid-June, and the families of this year's graduates file into the auditorium of Effat University, a compact private college for women in this city on the shores of the Red Sea.

Fathers and brothers, wearing the white, floor-length *dishdasha* most Saudi men favor, are seated to the left of the podium in a cordoned-off section for men. Across the aisle, hundreds of mothers and sisters take their seats, clad from head to toe in black *abayas*.

This gender-separated graduation ceremony is a hugely symbolic moment at Effat. Until three years ago men were not allowed to attend, as it would mean viewing women who were not members of their family—a taboo in Saudi society

After a father argued, in 2006, that he should be permitted to witness his daughter reach one of life's milestones, administrators dropped the ban and put up a partition. Those graduates who felt comfortable appearing in front of men marched across the stage first. Then the men were asked to leave the room, and the rest of the graduates appeared.

This year the partition was removed and all graduates were told there would be one march only. One student refused.

"I told her, 'If we are covered women, acting professionally and respectfully in existence with men in a professional setting, then there is nothing in Islam preventing that,'" says Rania Ibrahim, dean of students.

After thinking it over, the student marched along with everyone else.

"This is how we bring changes here," Ms. Ibrahim says.

In a nation where women are not allowed to get behind the wheel of a car and must receive approval from a male guardian to attend college, even the simplest efforts to bring women into public view, literally and figuratively, face many hurdles.

Yet colleges across the kingdom, such as Effat, have been taking steps toward educational equality for women. A new multibillion-dollar university for women is under construction, dozens of new women's colleges are springing up, and some government leaders are pressing for fuller participation of women in Saudi life.

But the question remains: How willing are Saudi citizens themselves to accept, and push forward, these new opportunities for women?

### **A Push From the Top**

Five years ago, the reform-minded King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud issued a decree encouraging women to seek jobs in fields that had previously been reserved for men, such as law and business. That was one of many signals he has sent suggesting that Saudi Arabia cannot progress economically or socially without giving more power to women.

The push is part of a broader effort to diversify Saudi Arabia's economy and reduce its economic dependence on oil. To do that, a skilled work force is needed.

More than 100 new institutes of higher education, including 12 comprehensive universities, are now under construction. More than 52,000 students, 30 to 35 percent of whom are women, have been sent abroad on full government scholarships. One-quarter of the nation's annual budget has been allocated to education.

For the first time, obtaining a university degree is widely seen as a necessity for Saudi women, and they make up some 59 percent of the national student body.

Yet many observers agree that the leadership of Saudi Arabia is more progressive than its citizens. An ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam pervades all aspects of Saudi life. Women lead largely separate, and severely circumscribed, lives.

Legally mandated gender segregation is the biggest barrier to equal opportunity for Saudi women. All universities are either single sex or are divided into male and female campuses.

University and Ministry of Higher Education officials say that equal educational experiences are available to both men and women at public universities, where tuition is covered by the government.

Proponents of separation of the sexes in higher education argue that it is to the woman's advantage.

"Rather than bringing women into competition with men and exposing them to harassment, Saudi society protects women from the kind of clashes we see in other kinds of societies," explains Mohammad A. Al-Ohali, deputy minister for educational affairs in the Ministry of Higher Education. "We're avoiding the pitfalls experienced in other societies."

Yet whether by design or default, the educational opportunities open to women are often fewer or of lesser quality than those available to men.

Hatoon A. Alfassi, a professor of women's history at King Saud University, in Riyadh, is one of the kingdom's most outspoken academics on the role of women in society.

"Whoever says that things are equal here for men and women is either lying or he's a man who has never set foot on a women's campus," says Ms. Alfassi. "It's a joke. It's not equal, and we women are always at a disadvantage."

The professor says she has been punished by her university for voicing such views. She has not been allowed to teach classes for the past nine years, and she says the university has never given her an official reason why. Still, her views are shared by some high-level administrators.

Princess Aljoharah Fahad M. Al-Saud, a member of the royal family, says it is "100 percent true" that female students have been at a disadvantage at Saudi Arabia's state universities. She is rector of the new \$11.5-billion Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University, which aims to change that.

The sprawling King Saud University, which has the largest enrollment in the country, illustrates some of the disparities. The men's campus is a brand-new, state-of-the-art facility. The women's campus is an aging mishmash of buildings from the 1960s and 1970s that were handed down from the men when they moved across town in the early 1990s. (Construction of a new women's campus is under way.)

Top programs like engineering, geology, archaeology, political science, and veterinary medicine are not offered to women at King Saud.

Women are not barred from studying any disciplines, Mr. Al-Ohali says. These particular programs are not offered simply because there is little demand for them, either from students or from the job market.

"You cannot open a discipline or a college for only one or two or three requests. It has to be within the development plan," he says.

At King Saud, men hold all final decision-making and budget-granting administrative positions—from the university rector on down to the departmental chairs. Mr. Al-Ohali explains that this is not official policy but has happened by default.

Women hold positions of authority on the women's campus of King Saud, although they report to superiors on the men's campus. Amal J. Fatani, vice dean of science for women, says she does not feel that her campus suffers in any way from being separate. The women's campus is run like a branch of the main campus, she says.

"We do function as one with the male campus," Ms. Fatani says. "We have equal pay. We have equal status. We have equal benefits as our male counterparts."

Still, most symposia, conferences, and departmental faculty meetings take place on the men's campus, and female faculty members who want to participate must listen in by phone or attend via closed-circuit television. That does not sit well with some faculty members.

"I find it insulting that we have to use technology this way. It's absurd that I'm prevented from sitting on a panel meeting with males," says Ms. Alfassi.

That same method is used on the women's campus when female professors cannot be found to teach courses. Male professors, who are not allowed on the women's campus, appear via video conference.

"My male professors have never met me, they have never talked to me face to face," says one female graduate student who did not want her name published for fear that her grades would suffer if she was known to have spoken out. "When I call them, sometimes they hang up in my face because I am a woman."

Even though the general design of the curriculum is the same for male and female students, "everything else is different," she says. "We cover less material, we read fewer texts. And I get the impression that things are being dumbed down for us because we are women."

The university's official policy is to offer the exact same courses—with the same final exams—to both men and women. However, Ms. Fatani says that the material covered in a course is up to the individual instructor, which leaves some room for disparities. The university's push toward quality control and accreditation should, she says, filter those practices out.

### **A Woman's Place**

Many reform-minded students and faculty members believe that administrators at public universities are afraid of a public backlash if they start providing educational opportunities for women that might bring them in more direct contact with men. And it's certainly true that many—if not most—Saudi women would not feel comfortable sitting in the same classroom as men, nor would their families allow it.

"The problem here is that nobody wants to take a chance," says Mervat El-Shafie, chair of the architecture department at Effat University. "So we did."

Effat's experience in broadening opportunities for its students shows that change is possible in Saudi society, but that it is likely to happen incrementally.

Being small, private, and elite has allowed Effat a degree of social elasticity not common on other campuses. Gender restrictions are not quite as rigid as elsewhere, and administrators have successfully persuaded some families to allow their daughters to study disciplines that once were out of reach of women.

Yet campus leaders are mindful of how delicate their position is.

"We have to push things," says Haifa R. Jamalallail, the university's president. "But we must push in a way that satisfies all the stakeholders—and I don't just mean students and their families, I mean stakeholders of the whole country's apparatus."

Two fields that have long been the exclusive domain of Saudi men, architecture and engineering, are now open to Effat's students. With billions of dollars' worth of construction

projects under way in the kingdom, requiring between 150,000 and 300,000 engineers and architects, this represents a significant opportunity for them.

"But when we started telling families that we planned to offer architecture and engineering, you can't believe how negative the feedback was," says Ms. Ibrahim, Effat's dean of students.

Some fathers argued it would be pointless to pay up to \$100,000 for their daughters to spend four years studying architecture when not a single firm in the country had ever hired a female architect. (Although women are now allowed to become architects, a requirement that companies must house female employees in separate offices has effectively deterred most companies from hiring women in key industries.)

Even bigger problems came from the country's deeply conservative religious establishment. Opening the work force—and by extension academe—to women will cause the kind of mixing of the sexes that, according to Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz al-Ashaikh, would lead Saudi women to "hellfire."

Still, administrators at Effat began a quiet and gradual campaign to convince parents that their daughters could work in these two fields without violating the strict constraints of Saudi society.

"When nobody in their wildest dreams ever imagined that women could work as architects or engineers, you have to change their minds gradually," Ms. Ibrahim says. "Shocking the whole world by agitating and upsetting the norms the community is used to—it's a recipe for failure."

To start, the university decided against introducing mechanical or civil engineering in favor of electrical and computer engineering. Jobs in the latter fields can be structured in a way that would not expose women to mixed work environments.

"The moment we explained to parents that electrical and computer engineers are mixing with a computer most of the time in an office environment, parents were happier," Ms. Ibrahim says. "Some were ready to accept it."

But in designing the architecture program, Effat's administrators faced another hurdle. Since there were no female architects working in Saudi Arabia, they were going to have to hire men to teach the classes.

And since it would be nearly impossible to teach something as visual as architecture through closed-circuit television, those male professors would need to be in the same classrooms as their students.

To accommodate that, a special classroom and block of faculty offices were cordoned off from the rest of the campus. On most of the campus, students can remove the floor-length black *abaya* that women must wear in public. In the cordoned-off zone, women have to cover up.

The logistics were the easy part. The challenge, again, was persuading families to allow their daughters to enroll.

"Not only did we now have to find students whose father had the capacity of mind to allow his daughter to explore new ideas," says Ms. El-Shafie. "But they had to let their daughters be in the same classroom as a male professor."

Effat University's engineering and architecture programs, begun in 2006 and 2005, respectively, have taken shape gradually, growing from three students in engineering and 10 in architecture in the first year to 45 in engineering and 62 in architecture today.

In the vast network of Saudi state-financed universities, Effat's victory is small. And the impact of the campus overall is not much larger: Just 700 students enrolled at the university last year.

## **2 Steps Forward**

For academics like Ms. Alfassi, progress cannot come fast enough.

She has been urging public universities to ease restrictions on gender segregation. Men should be allowed to teach women face to face, she says, and male and female faculty members should be able to sit in the same room.

"I find it so insulting when they respond by saying, 'This society is not ready for this or that.' As if we are minors that need to be taken care of all the time," Ms. Alfassi says. "They

always hang things on our society not being ready for changes. But what are we waiting for?"

Certainly there are signs of progress. Alongside the long, hot highway leading into the sprawling capital city, on a 2,000-acre stretch of desert, thousands of laborers and a forest of cranes are at work on what promises to be the world's largest university for women.

Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University is the third-largest construction project in Saudi Arabia. It will replace a collection of smaller women's colleges on a campus twice the size of New York's Central Park. Eventually it expects to enroll 40,000 students.

Princess Aljoharah, the university's rector, is particularly proud of the venture.

"This will be Saudi Arabia's first female-run university, with a female rector, female vice rectors," she says. "It was the next natural step for women's education here."

Government officials hope that the university will become an academic pipeline, turning out more female professors to staff the growing number of women's colleges in the kingdom.

Still, at a recent meeting of university administrators, it was clear that the vision remained a long way from reality. Attendees spent most of the meeting trying to determine what the institution's mission would be. Actual programs have yet to be determined, even though the campus is slated to open in 2012.

"When we change here, it is always like this," Ms. Alfassi sighs. "Very, very slow. Two steps forward and one step back."