

Women's Work

In the Middle East, a new vision of the roles of women in both education and the workplace are bringing beneficial changes across the region.

BY SUSAN LADIKA



Iman from Lebanon works at a computer.

WHEN Rifaa Al-Harthy, a recent university graduate from Oman, learned of the possibility of spending five months studying and getting on-the-job training in the United States, she couldn't resist applying for the chance. She saw it as an opportunity to broaden her education on legal and business subjects, gain more exposure to Western culture, and serve as an emissary for her own society.

Al-Harthy personifies the evolving role of women in the Middle East—well-educated, confident, curious about the world, and working to rise to positions of power in their societies. Even in conservative Iran, where they have become the face of postelection protests.

To Al-Harthy, who is spending the spring and summer in the United States as part of the Legal and Business Fellowship Program funded by the U.S. State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), it's a chance to "network, gain exposure, and understand Western culture." At the same time, "I consider myself as ambassador for Oman and Muslim women in general."



Women in Yemen participate in a computer training session.



(screen inset)
The Middle East Partnership Initiative Chicago Delegation Weekend Get-Away to New Buffalo, Michigan.

New Realms of Possibility

These days, more and more universities and organizations in the United States are pairing up with those in the Middle East to offer new educational opportunities to that region's women—whether it is through exchange programs, conferences, degree programs, or even setting up campuses in the Middle East. It's a region where a whole new realm of possibilities is opening up, including in traditionally male fields like engineering and information technology

"All over the world, employment in the formal sector has empowered women by giving them a measure of economic independence and a chance for active participation in society," says Sheikha Abdulla Al-Misnad, president of Qatar University. "Experience around the world also has shown that educating a woman benefits her whole family, so that the fruits of her success are shared among a broader circle."

Getting women involved in the labor force is even more crucial in a country like Qatar, where a large percentage of the population is comprised of nonnationals. According to the U.S. State Department, they make up about 90 percent of the workforce. A number of other countries in the region also have large numbers of foreign workers.

"Our society is in need of participation of every single member. We cannot afford to underutilize our scarce human resources," Al-Misnad says.

Participants in the Women in Technology Program (WIT) at a computer training in Jordan

A wealth of opportunities were found in computer engineering, as it allows for career mobility, the possibility of working for private companies, and the chance to work from home.



Education is key to making the most of the resources at hand. While some countries have had open, accessible higher education systems for decades, others are just starting to take off.

Paradigm Shift in Saudi Arabia

One country undergoing a major shift is Saudi Arabia, where the first private women's college opened in the kingdom a decade ago, under the leadership of Queen Effat. Since that time Effat College, located in Jeddah, has become Effat University and launched a number of international partnerships, including a bachelor's degree in electrical and computer engineering, established in conjunction with Duke University in Durham, North Carolina and funded through a grant from MEPI.

Marianne Hassan, associate dean for new initiatives in the Pratt School of Engineering at Duke, said the two schools considered "what could we develop that society would accept and be economically beneficial."

A wealth of opportunities were found in computer engineering, as it allows for career mobility, the possibility of working for private companies, and the chance to work from home. The first step was simply educating Saudi girls and women about the wide range of possibilities engineering had to offer because many viewed it solely as opening the door to a career in construction.

At Duke, many computer engineering students are recruited for jobs in finance and management consulting, Hassan says. In Saudi Arabia, "Why shouldn't women have the best financial analysts for themselves?"

Duke has helped develop the program at the Jeddah school and brought in faculty members to help teach courses. The program is now in its third year. The young Saudi women enrolled in the program have "pride in being trailblazers in education," Hassan says. "The days are numbered in that economy of women not working."

At the same time, the impact of a degree in a technical field carries over into the household. "If a child has a parent with a degree in a technical area, there's going to be a payoff somewhere down the line," Hassan says. And the women "have a different lens on the world by having gone through the education process."

In addition to the work being accomplished at Effat University, King Abdullah laid the foundation stone in October of 2008 for a facility that will become The Princess Noura bint Abdulrahman University, with a capacity to enroll some 40,000 female students. The *Arab News* reported that the institution is intended to become the world's largest center of higher learning for women.

In Lebanon, an Established Track Record

Saudi Arabia is starting to play catch-up with places like Lebanon, where women began breaking down barriers in the 1960s, says Rima Karami, an assistant professor of education at American University of Beirut (AUB).

She considers her own mother, now 67, a pioneer who finished university and began working. “It was the first generation where it was okay to marry at 24.”

“My generation had a role model. It was never a question. Of course I was going to college, of course I was going to have a career,” says Karami, who earned her bachelor’s degree in chemistry and master’s degree in science education from AUB. She taught high school chemistry for one year, then headed to Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, for a Ph.D. in educational leadership and administration. Karami says she decided to get her doctorate overseas because Lebanon has a limited number of Ph.D. programs, and the quality isn’t as high as those abroad.

Karami married, had children, and worked part time as an adjunct faculty member in Oregon and Washington for a decade before returning to Lebanon two years ago, where she does pre-service and in-service training for elementary and high school principals of both genders. “Training principals is still a bit foreign here.”

Oman Advances Primary and Secondary Levels

Lebanon isn’t the only country in the region that has begun focusing on improving the training of those running elementary and secondary schools. Jan Westrick, chair of the department of education at Valparaiso State University in Valparaiso, Indiana, has been actively involved in the process in Oman.

It’s an oil-rich country where the sultan saw a need for a universal education system and developed one from the ground up starting in the 1970s. Initially the country had to import teachers, and the system was quite centralized, Westrick says. Now individual schools are being given more autonomy. That means “principals need to learn to operate in this less-centralized environment.”

As part of that, Westrick has spent six weeks in Oman helping to train principals as part of a program funded by MEPI. Sessions focused on topics such as discerning the culture of an organization, running meetings, long-range planning, and decisionmaking. The sessions involved about 20 principals, both men and women, as well as officials from the Ministry of Education. Those who have received training will then go on to train other principals.

Qatar Revamps Across the Spectrum

Another country striving to improve education at all levels is Qatar, where the primary and secondary education systems have been revamped, and university education is at the forefront of development efforts.

Al-Misnad, Qatar University’s president, has been involved in reforming education across the spectrum. While literacy rates in the country are around 90 percent, “the style of teaching remained largely dependent on rote memorization, with little emphasis on critical thinking or analysis,” she says, making the country uncompetitive in today’s ever-evolving knowledge society.

The primary and secondary education systems were revamped so skills such as computer literacy, critical thinking, research, and communication were emphasized.

At the higher education level, the country founded Education City on the edge of Doha, in a project that now has six U.S. universities with campuses at the location, ranging from the Weill Cornell Medical College to a journalism and communications program offered by Northwestern University.



The first school to set up a branch campus at Education City was Virginia Commonwealth University, which was invited by the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science, and Community Development, which established Education City. The foundation is a non-profit organization founded in 1995 and is designed to improve the country’s human development.

In 1998 Virginia Commonwealth University brought its fashion, interior, and graphic design programs to the country. “These programs were viewed as creative fields that would both attract women to study and would lead to professional positions,” says Allyson Vanstone, dean of Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar.

Originally the program admitted only female students, but in 2007 it broadened out to include male students as well. The school has prepared its students for careers in both the public and private sectors. “We

Duke University administrators, Dean of Education Kristina Johnson (second from right) and Senior Associate Dean for Education, Tod Laursen (far right), at Effat College, a higher education institution for women based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Lama Jaber on campus at the American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in science education at the University of Maryland.



work closely with local businesses and design companies and continue to support our alumni to open design businesses,” Vanstone says.

Al-Misnad, who is a member of the board of the Qatar Foundation, says the U.S. universities were sought in Qatar because despite the country’s educational improvements, “it takes time to see the fruits of these reforms, and in the meantime, we need the help of established institutions of higher education.” Schools were asked to participate because they filled specific needs in Qatari society.

One challenge still to overcome is the lack of males enrolled in higher education. At Qatar University, 70 percent of students are female because men can get high-paying jobs right after high school, Al-Misnad says. “This is one of our biggest challenges—how to motivate young men to pursue higher education and graduate degrees. For women, higher education is a must to secure good jobs outside of the home.”

Al-Misnad herself helps to serve as a role model to draw women and girls into the educational fold. “Positive role models show young women that it can be done, and that it can be done in a way that is not incompatible with tradition or with our honored family values.”

Lama Jaber, a graduate with bachelor’s and master’s degrees from American University of Beirut says she’s impressed by Lebanese women who “multitask and are multidimensional. It’s really inspiring when you find women who keep balance between their personal life and career life.”

Jaber spent three years teaching chemistry and general science in secondary and middle schools in Lebanon, and is now heading to the University of

Maryland in College Park, Maryland, to obtain her Ph.D. in science education.

Jaber hopes to help break down some barriers of her own in a university system where males dominate when it comes to teaching subjects such as science. Her goal is to conduct research and teach at the university level when she returns home.

Women in Technology

Often programs in the Middle East tend to focus on those that will be accepted even within conservative elements of society. In 2005, the Women in Technology program, administered from the San Francisco office of the Institute of International Education (IIE) and funded by MEPI, was introduced. The program is designed to help women develop their information technology skills and provide them with opportunities for economic empowerment.

The program originally began in Yemen, and has since expanded to involve 50 partner organizations in nine countries in the region, says program director Heather Ramsey. The program targets underserved women in each country, and the partner organizations operate computer training centers, with corporate support in the form of donations of computers, software, and other supplies.

Women learn about things like how to use computer programs, how to blog, and even about entrepreneurship. As of June, more than 6,000 women had already gone through the training, Ramsey says, and the number is growing by leaps and bounds.

While families in some rural areas are fairly isolated, and only a limited number of activities are viewed as “acceptable” for women, the women are able to go to the training centers, because computer usage is seen as “pretty innocuous,” Ramsey says.

Yet women have used the training to do things like create domestic violence and breast cancer awareness sites. “What women do with these skills is phenomenal,” Ramsey says. “It empowers them to do whatever their dreams are.”

The Multinational Development of Women in Technology (MDWIT) program is starting down a similar path. The nonprofit organization based in Baltimore, Maryland, aims to foster the advancement of women in technology around the globe.

It currently is supporting the development of a Center for Women and Technology for the Arab Region. So far meetings have been held in Dubai and Qatar to discuss the plans for the center, which would focus on entrepreneurship, education, and workforce development, says Claudia Morrell, chief execu-

tive officer of MDWIT, which is supporting the development plans.

Morrell, who is the former executive director of the Center for Women and Information Technology at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, says, "We're not talking about women, we're talking about economic development. It really doesn't make a lot of sense to leave any talent sitting on the table."

Targeting Girls

While programs such as those offered by the IIE and MDWIT target women, others are directed at providing new educational opportunities for girls in the region.

The Mosaic Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based charitable foundation, working with AMIDEAST (America-Mideast Educational and Training Services Inc.), a nonprofit organization focused on improving mutual understanding and cooperation between the two regions, and headquartered in Washington, launched the Entrepreneurship Awareness Program this summer and will teach eleventh-grade girls in Oman and Yemen about careers in business.

The program is designed to help these teens consider whether entrepreneurship might be right for them. The three-week program is being offered to 30 girls in each country and will teach them about things like business basics and computer skills, as well as providing them with online networking opportunities with other female entrepreneurs once the course is completed.

Legal and Business Opportunities

Meanwhile, the Legal and Business Fellowship Program, which AMIDEAST also is involved in, is designed to provide new insights for recent young professional women from the region.

Under the program, Al-Harthy and 28 other women spent a month studying at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and then interning. Al-Harthy, who has a law degree, is spending the summer in the legal department of Blue Cross Blue Shield in Chicago.

The program is seen as an opportunity for the women to broaden their horizons and bolster their educations.

For Al-Harthy, although Oman opened its first public university more than two decades ago, the brightest and best are still offered opportunities to study in other



A Unique Partnership

Brandeis University student
Claire Cooper greets a female
Al-Quds University student

NOAM SHARON

IT'S A PROGRAM that defies many expectations: a Jewish-sponsored American university partnering with a Palestinian one.

The partnership was launched by the presidents of the two schools, Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, and Al-Quds University in Jerusalem in 2003, established with the goal of fostering peace and set up through the International Center for Ethics, Justice, and Public Life.

A recent project has been a women's conference entitled "Women, Leadership, State and Society," held in Palestine in May and funded by a Ford Foundation grant.

The grant stipulated that an international conference be held, and since the two schools had collaborated on gender studies from early on, they decided that would be the conference focus, says Sue Lanser, former chair of Brandeis's gender studies department and still a professor at the university.

"The full participation of women is just critical to the development of a democratic and civil society," Lanser says.

In Palestine, female unemployment is higher than that for males, they marry at a young age, and they are underrepresented in both academia and society at large, she says.

During the May conference, which drew together more than 150 people, the focus was on topics such as women's leadership in the university, the role of culture and religion in women's leadership, and how classrooms can foster women's leadership.

Lanser says she's hopeful the conference will "spark new thinking."

And that's an overarching goal of the Brandeis-Al-Quds partnership, which is intended to educate the schools about the advantages of cooperation and understanding, as well as improving administrative capacity at Al-Quds, and offering academic opportunities for faculty, staff, and students at the two schools.

Two students who have already put those opportunities to good use are Holly Devon and Claire Cooper, both juniors at Brandeis. In 2008 they took part in a program that brought students from the American school and from the Palestinian school to Istanbul, Turkey, to discuss what constitutes a "good" society.

There, students from both universities roomed together, held morning discussions, and then explored the city.

Cooper sees Istanbul as a "kind of common ground. It's not too Western, not too Mideastern."

Both women jumped at the chance to travel to Al-Quds in 2009. In Palestine they visited classes, spent time with the Palestinians they had befriended in Istanbul, and visited nongovernmental organizations, giving them more insights into Palestine and the Islamic way of life.

Cooper, who is studying health: science, society, and policy and is not Jewish, says "I was really excited to experience first-hand everything I had heard about. The Palestinian people we met were very, very welcoming."

Devon, a comparative literature and history major who is Jewish, says "I never felt unsafe. I never felt threatened. I found people to be very open minded. It definitely affects the way I perceive the conflict."

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Jan Westwick,
professor and
chair of education
at Valparaiso
University, teaching
women in Oman

It's a far
different story
in Iran, where
traces of
Westernization
were purged
from the
university
system after
the revolution,
and women
don't work,
although they
make up half
the college
graduates.



countries. She graduated from high school in Oman with stellar grades, and received a scholarship from the government to study abroad. She headed to the University of Melbourne, in Australia, to study law.

During her time in the United States under the Legal and Business Fellowship Program, Al-Harthly has had the opportunity to “learn quite a bit about the business world” during her weeks at the Wharton School.

Her internship at Blue Cross Blue Shield has given her insights into areas of law such as contracts, and she's also spent time at an outside law firm, where she's learned how to argue a court case, examine witnesses, and even participate in a mock trial. After she returns home, she'd like eventually to establish an international law firm with ties to those in other countries.

Another participant in the program is Najlaa Abbass Al-Hoohy, who graduated from the Girls' College of Education in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, before heading to Yemen to work for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and then in private industry, where there is much more equality between men and women. She also received her M.B.A. from the Open University of Malaysia.

She recently returned to Saudi Arabia to start a new job, and she's witnessed the increased access for women in society and the workforce in recent years. As one part of that, the Saudi government implemented a new scholarship program in 2005 that allows Saudi men and women to study around the world. “They want to empower the young work force,” Al-Hoohy says.

During her time in the United States, Al-Hoohy is interning at PumpBiz.com, which sells various types

of pumps online. She eventually would like to take her new skills and use them to start her own Internet-based business.

Opportunities in Government

Another program designed to empower Saudi women is one that brought together the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, and Dar Al-Hekma College, a women's college in Jeddah.

Leigh Nolan, a Tufts Ph.D. student researching the politics of higher education reform in the Gulf region, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia, was asked to coordinate the program, which was offered last year.

The goal was to develop a training program to help female graduates gain jobs in Saudi Arabia's various government ministries. Because many of the women have families, the first four months of the program were held at Dar Al-Hekma College, while two months were held at Tufts.

Tufts sent over female Ph.D. candidates to teach, including Nolan, who called it a “life-changing experience” after being “intensively involved in the life and learning process of Saudi women.”

While Nolan had assumed the women would be “rather reticent,” she instead found that they were “extremely dynamic,” with one participant even in charge of 500 people at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce.

Nolan, who has spent other periods in the Gulf region, including studying Arabic in Yemen, says “I think Saudi Arabia and its society are really in a lot of flux. There's a lot of change happening.”

Iran—A Separate Case

It's a far different story in Iran, where traces of Westernization were purged from the university system after the revolution, and women don't work, although they make up half the college graduates.

Mitra Shavarini, a lecturer in women's and gender studies at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts, who came to the United States from Iran as a child, says high school students must pass a difficult entrance exam before being admitted into university. Although 64 percent of those passing the exam are female, university enrollment is capped at 50 percent women.

For those who are allowed in, universities are "the only public domain they can participate in and succeed," Shavarini says.

Because the universities were "purified" after the revolution, even conservative families allow their daughters to attend, she says. And having a good education is seen as a way to bolster the young woman's dowry. Without a good education, she can't get a good husband.

But after graduation, women's career paths are extremely limited. They might find work as teachers, in health care, or in public service. A woman who studied to be an astrophysicist might easily wind up stuck at home. Some women "are very, very depressed after they graduate because they had other aspirations," Shavarini says.

In Iraq Turmoil Leads to Difficulties

Things are also difficult in Iraq, due to the continued post-war turmoil. Mary Oakes Smith, president of the Iraqi Women's Fellowship Foundation in Washington, D.C., is trying to make it a bit easier by focusing on opportunities in higher education and workforce development.

Smith, who worked for the World Bank and other development agencies, attended a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) conference in 2005 on revitalizing higher education in Iraq, which brought together deans and vice deans from Iraqi and Western universities.

During the last 15 years of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraqi women represented only a third of university students and less than 25 percent of the workforce. "I felt compelled to help Iraqi women...to gain access to higher education that could put them at the top of their professions and to become leaders in the economic, political, and social development of Iraq," Smith says. That is particularly important due to the deaths of so many Iraqi men during the war and post-war years.

She also learned that before their rights were curtailed, women were well regarded for their prowess in engineering and science. As a result, Smith established the Iraqi Women's Fellowship Foundation, working in conjunction with the State Department and AMIDEAST.

This summer, three women who lecture on engineering at Iraqi universities arrived at three California universities to take part in the yearlong fellowship. "They are very committed to both engineering and education," says Quincy Dermody, coordinator at AMIDEAST.

AMIDEAST is also involved with the Legal and Business Fellowship Program, as well as a new program, the HSBC Financial

& Entrepreneurship Awareness (FEA) Program, which began this summer and is sponsored by HSBC, which is bringing 30 first-year female college students to the United States for almost three weeks to study business.

The young women don't necessarily have to be business majors, so the program is designed to "open their eyes to this (the business) world," Dermody says.

The participants, from five Middle Eastern countries, are spending two weeks at Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where they will learn about business etiquette, business English, making business plans, and will visit local businesses. They also are spending a few days in Washington, D.C., as well as at HSBC bank's offices in Chicago.

The program is offered to young women who attend school on scholarships or pay only low fees, and wouldn't otherwise have such opportunities.



Women from the United Arab Emirates are assisted by trainers in a professional development program.

Collaboration Brings Benefits

Collaboration is becoming increasingly common as it helps to streamline program development and the transfer of information.

In February, Jean Campbell, chair of NAFSA's Middle East Interest Group and associate director of the Middle East Studies Center at Portland State University, was one of the presenters at the NAFSA-GCC Forum, sponsored by Qatar University. The event drew together more than 225 people from the United States and the Middle East.

During the conference, Campbell, who has worked in Egypt to help provide education for girls in rural areas and has relationships with various universities in the region, spoke about the cultural dimensions of education for development. In areas such as the Middle East, gender and traditional values have strong roles to play. It's a region where successful women "feel tremendous pressure to do things better than men," she says.

Even if women don't work, having a good education brings great benefits to their children and themselves. Campbell says, "This is the single most important thing you can do if you want to enhance national development."

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