

Education Equals Power

How women's colleges are changing the Middle East

A SELDOM-REPORTED NEWS story in the U.S. is the rise in educational and work opportunities for women in the Persian Gulf. One reason for the upswing: Women's colleges in the region have flourished over the last dozen years. Some of the universities are developed on a U.S. model that encourages questioning and debate, and administrators and faculty include Westerners.

In the relatively open United Arab Emirates, a national movement to educate women has made its mark in the past decade, says Denise Gifford, dean of student affairs at Zayed University. From campuses in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, the university, opened in 1998, now serves 3,500 Emirati women (about 300 men attend in separate locations). The diverse faculty teaches primarily in English and most deans are American. Apparently, the appeal of U.S.-style education is its focus on critical thinking rather than rote learning, in a setting where students can argue different points of view. Permitting women access to a free university education, especially this kind, is still new for the region.

Like those at Zayed, students at Effat University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, are pioneers. Only about half of all Saudi girls attended school of any kind in the mid-1970s. A generation later, Dean Haifa Jamal Allail is creating a source of world-class higher education for women. As part of that mission, Effat changed from a college to a university in January, with plans for graduate studies. It boasts the first college of engineering for women in Saudi Arabia (created with Duke University's Pratt School of Engineering), and an MBA program designed with Instituto de Empresa in Madrid.

In traditional Saudi universities, professors teach men students directly, but women must watch from a separate room via closed-circuit TV. At Effat, faculty teach students face-to-face, allowing for real conversation. The university opened in 1999 with 37 students; now it has 600, with capacity for 3,000.

Still, Effat and Zayed have a way to go. Zayed attracted headlines in 2006 for firing a teacher who showed her class the notorious Danish cartoons of

the Prophet Muhammad. A wall surrounds the Effat campus so that men can't see in. Students at both institutions may face opposition from relatives who discourage them from working after graduation, or from attending university at all. But at Zayed, Gifford says, "The young women feel that acquiring an education and working as a professional after graduation are patriotic."

Conflicts between those supporting women's higher education in the Persian Gulf and those opposing it aren't surprising, says Jesse Lytle of Women's Education Worldwide, an alliance of women's colleges. "You see a similar dynamic in traditional Muslim countries that you saw in North American Protestant cultures in the 19th century. ... [In any] society that's essentially a patriarchy, [where] education is one of the primary routes to power, you're opening the power structure up to encroachment by new groups [if you let them be educated]. In this case, it's women."

Over time, these institutions may continue to raise expectations for women. Even now, 70 percent of Zayed's female students are employed after graduation. The university hosts a biannual international conference on women as global leaders, the next one scheduled for spring 2010.

Marcia Grant, who served as Effat's first dean and returned for the first graduation ceremony, was struck by the difference in the students' demeanors in just a decade. "The students inhabited their bodies in a new way," she says. "Their eyes were alight."

—ANDREA COOPER

♦ Students on a break at Tehran University, where the majority of enrolled are women



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