

Saudi-American Forum



SAF Item of Interest

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Correcting Misconceptions About Women's Role in Saudi Society

By Maha Akeel, *Arab News* Staff

Editor's Note:

The Saudi-American Forum would like to thank *Arab News* for permission to share this article with our readers.

Correcting Misconceptions About Women's Role in Saudi Society By Maha Akeel, *Arab News* staff

JEDDAH, 23 October 2003 - Four Saudi businesswomen were part of a women's delegation which spent three days in Brussels earlier this month. The delegation met members of the Brussels Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the European Parliament and the president of the lower house of the Belgian Parliament, Herman De Croo.

The meetings were arranged by the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry to show what Saudi women have achieved in various fields, correct some misconceptions about women's rights in the Kingdom and explain how women are involved in Saudi Arabia's economic development. The members of the delegation included Lubna Olayan, CEO of Olayan Financing Company, Alia Banaja, chairwoman of "2 The Point" website design and software programming company, Dr. Maha Al-Mounif, a pediatrician, and interior designer Rasha Al-Hoshan.

The main goal was to change the image Westerners have of Saudi women which has been created by the Western media. I blame not only them but also us and our media for the shortcomings and misrepresentations," Alia Banaja told Arab News. "The success of this delegation should encourage the Saudi chambers and the Foreign Ministry to send more such delegations," she said.

The first day the delegation met members of the Brussels Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "Each of us spoke briefly about ourselves in our fields and about Saudi women in general and their achievements. The Belgians were eager to hear us, and there was a great deal of press coverage," Alia Banaja explained.

The women were asked many questions. What rights do women in Saudi Arabia enjoy? Are

Saudi women equal to men? What job options are available to women? Why doesn't the government allow women to be trained as engineers or lawyers?

Alia Banaja said that a few years ago, "there were no marketing departments in women's universities, but when the government realized there was a need for this specialty for women, it was provided to them. In addition, public universities cannot offer all specialties which means that private colleges offer some degrees not available in public ones. Women entered the work force only 20 to 30 years ago and the laws suitable at that time are not suitable today. When the government saw how the numbers of businesswomen had increased, a group of us academics and businesswomen were invited three months ago to the Shoura Council to participate in reformulating and adjusting the labor laws for women. So the government is interacting with women to develop its policies."

Alia Banaja said the women had not felt uncomfortable or under pressure in answering the questions; in fact, they tried to be as open and truthful as possible, especially about things they felt needed changing. Concerning jobs for women and salaries, the women said that in some cases they were equal to men.

Asked about women's absence from the Shoura Council, they said that women were there as consultants and that their presence as members will be a gradual process.

At the European Parliament, the women's rights committee asked specific questions about women's rights, particularly in cases of divorce. "We informed them about women's rights under Islamic law and they were surprised. They asked us if we could express our opinions freely and we said that we did and that we received reactions to our concerns and problems."

Another issue raised was sexual segregation and the veiling of women. "We said that there was interaction in some occupations and that by using modern technology, it was easy to communicate without face-to-face meetings. If there was need for such meeting, we could easily put on the veil."

Alia Banaja said that the committee had a completely different picture of the situation. "One of the committee members said that we changed their views 180 degrees. They had thought that Saudi women stayed home, raised children and that was it. I said that the main priority for every woman is still to raise her children and she chooses to work if she has the time. It is not an obligation. I also pointed out how we treat our elderly with care and respect rather than putting them in nursing homes. This treatment is what our religion demands of us. One of the women said that she hoped her family would care for her in the same way."

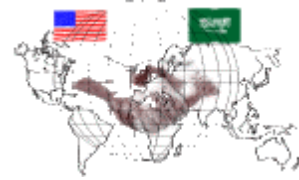
The women all agreed on one point. "We should send a delegation to the US because even if we differ with American government policy, we still have good relations with the American people. We cannot say we hate America. There is a long history, not just political but also commercial, social and even familial. If we have criticisms of American policy, that doesn't mean we shouldn't send delegations there. In Brussels we did not meet only government officials but also the general public. These conversations and encounters on the side are the best ways of changing

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the negative impressions that many Westerners have of Saudi Arabia and Saudi women."

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The Forum is a resource for Americans who value the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia and who want to act in response to erroneous and misleading depictions of the relationship in the media and elsewhere. The Forum is a vehicle for stakeholders in the Saudi-U.S. relationship to contribute their experiences and their ideas and opinions on the issues of the day.

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