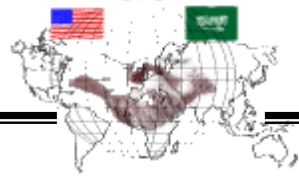


# Saudi-American Forum

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SAF Item of Interest

February 11, 2004

## A Mind-Bending Venture Into Saudi Gender Politics By Judith Barnett

### **Editor's Note:**

The Saudi-American Forum would like to thank Ms. Barnett for permission to share her article with our readers. This article originally appeared in *The Washington Post*, Outlook section on January 25, 2004.

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As I arrived at the Jiddah Economic Forum a week ago, busily chatting with several American businessmen, I mistakenly approached the door labeled "Men Entrance." "Women, women," said the guard in a panic, as though I were making a bold political statement. I hadn't dealt with separate entrances in many years, and the last time, ironically, wasn't during my decades of travel to the Middle East but in Washington, where some well-known social clubs continued the practice until the late '80s.

Confronted with it again, I began to think that perhaps the advice that I had heard for years was correct: Saudi business is for men only.

Yet the remarkable Saudi businesswomen attending the annual conference on the kingdom's economic and social issues were about to prove that wrong.

The U.S. delegation of four women and 16 men had decided to sit together in the vast part of the auditorium reserved for the 1,200 men in attendance. As foreigners, we were not questioned. So after venturing into the far smaller women's area to have coffee with some Saudis, I rejoined the men beyond the partition that was to define so much of the proceedings. During a question-and-answer period, a moderator looking for a question from "the ladies' section" noted that he could not see that side of the audience, which was "in darkness over there." It was indeed dark. The stage was bathed in light, and the women were a sea of 300 black abayas. A female delegate responded, "We are not in darkness, you just don't see us." Increasingly, these women who are still perceived as being in the shadows are not.

As a Commerce Department official doing trade advocacy work during the Clinton administration, and now as a private consultant and lawyer, I had concluded that I could best help my clients by working in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Qatar, Morocco and ABS -- Anywhere But Saudi. My business grew but Saudi Arabia represented as much as 80 percent of the market for several of my clients, and I realized that I was limited. So after 10 years of traveling nearly

monthly in the Middle East, I decided to venture into the no-woman's-land of Saudi Arabia to attend the forum. I hardly knew what to expect. What I found was that the role of Saudi women is changing far more quickly than most in the West realize.

The conference opened, as one might in Davos, Geneva or Washington, with the chief executive officer of a powerful financial conglomerate discussing the need for real change to reform a national economy. Later, the dean of a British business school spoke of reforming and sustaining the Saudi economy, and a panel of experts spoke about women as the driving force to economic survival and long-term commercial success.

But something was very different. These speeches were given by women: Lubna Olayan, the Saudi CEO of the multibillion-dollar Olayan Financing Company, gave the keynote speech, the first by a woman in the conference's five-year history. Laura Tyson, dean of the London School of Economics and chair of President Clinton's Council of Economic Advisers, spoke on how Saudi Arabia might build and sustain economic wealth.

As the *Arab News*, published in Jiddah, put it in a banner headline the next day, "Women Steal Limelight at JEF."

Some Saudi businessmen sat listening attentively to the women while others sat with arms folded, whispering to their colleagues, and looking as though they were not sure how to react to the change.

By contrast, during coffee breaks in the women's section, it was clear that many women think change is coming far too slowly. They spoke of their frustration at being denied the right to study in several major fields: law, engineering, architecture and others. One woman complained that she could not take a job or open her own company without the explicit approval and participation of her closest male relative.

Men said, "Things will change in time." Women asked, "When?" At dinner the first night, a former government minister said that the women in his family are not concerned that they are prohibited from driving, as they all have drivers and prefer the status quo. "When a group of women in the 1990s insisted on driving, they set the cause of women back a decade," he said. "Those women must realize that many things may change, but the change will only come in time." A veiled young woman quietly replied, "I was one of those women. That was thirteen years ago. How long do you expect us to wait?"

Change was the dominant topic not only at the meetings and dinners, but also during informal conversations in the family section of the hotel coffee shop (which allows groups of mixed or male and female customers). Saudis, as well as foreigners with long experience in the country, agreed that Saudi Arabia is changing but pointed to different reasons. Some said that economics underlies the change; the Saudi economy is in flux and is no longer based entirely on oil. Roughly 60 percent of the population is under 20 years old, and the official unemployment rate stands at 10 percent, which does not include women and is likely an underestimate even of male unemployment. Others argued that the terrorist attacks in Riyadh last year had shaken the Saudi

sense of security and stability. But most agreed that the role of women could not remain static.

After the sessions one afternoon, some of us Americans went to the souk. Our Saudi hostess had sent us abayas in advance of the trip, and I awkwardly put on the long black robe and veil. At first, I jokingly thought of the abaya's advantages: No more South Beach diets, and I would no longer be enslaved to Western designers. But after a couple of hours, I felt invisible. I had spent a lifetime in the "quiet revolution" of the U.S. women's movement, working so that my daughter could attend the law school of her choice and then break the glass ceiling if she chose to. Those were far from the issues here. Although I deeply respect the culture and traditions of Saudi culture, I felt, in my abaya, that I was a satellite observing someone else's world.

Amid the discussions of economic reform, some of the forum's speakers, particularly the women, openly addressed women's changing role in Saudi society. Olayan, the Saudi corporate leader, courageously urged her fellow participants, men and women, to "abandon the progress-without-change philosophy," by which she meant talk of change without any pressure to act. She called for a business economy that is based on talent and merit, not connections and family. "If we want Saudi Arabia to progress, we have no choice but to embrace change," she said, stressing that "those changes can be embraced in a way that preserves our core Islamic values."

In an all-female panel discussion, Thurayya Arrayed, planning adviser to Saudi oil giant Aramco, said that to speed economic growth, "we need proper training and employment of women."

In response to a question about women driving, Selwa Al-Hazza, head of ophthalmology at King Faisal Specialist Hospital in Riyadh, said she felt that society was not ready to see a woman behind the wheel. Arrayed disagreed and, to a round of applause, advised, "[Even] if you don't want your daughter to drive, don't stop others."

To my surprise, most Saudi government officials, business people and other attendees were available and open to all participants, women and men alike, though Westerners got special treatment. Of course it was far easier for the few Western women on the men's side to catch speakers as they left the podium, which happened to be on the men's side. One quandary, though, had to do with commenting during the formal sessions. Questions alternated between the men's section and the women's. Because I was a woman in the men's area, moderators seemed uncertain how to accept my questions. It was not until the final panel, with a dwindling audience, that one brave gentleman pointed to me and said, "O.K, your question now."

At the airport as we were leaving, our delegation learned from a *Wall Street Journal* reporter that the conference had become a source of national controversy. The Saudi grand mufti had "condemned the obscene scenes of female wantonness at the Jiddah Economic Forum." He declared that "Jiddah is not just history now, but legend." In objecting to the mixing of men and women, and to the appearance of some women "without the wearing of the hijab ordered by God," the mufti was quoted by the media as saying, "I warn against the dire consequences that such practices will have." Whether this was a warning of possible retribution or a desperate clinging to the past is unclear. Yet, I have no doubt that Saudi women are now at the table, perhaps not as full participants, but never again to be ignored. For three days in Jiddah, they

showed that the hand that rocks the cradle may well be the hand that rules the world.

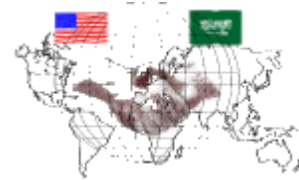
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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Judith Barnett** began The Barnett Group, LLC in 2003 to provide trade consulting services to private sector companies and government agencies, specializing in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Prior to starting her own company, Ms. Barnett was a Managing Consultant for the PA Consulting Group (PA), joining PA after an acquisition of her original firm, Georgetown Global Investments Corporation in 2000. Ms. Barnett continues to provide a one-stop shop for U.S. companies interested in creating or expanding trade and investment in the MENA. Before consulting, Ms. Barnett served in the Clinton Administration from October 1993 to December 1998 as the Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) for Africa and the Near East, U.S. Department of Commerce. Her other experience includes practice as a corporate lawyer and litigator, a law professor, a public affairs specialist, and a writer.

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