

“We are unstoppable”

A new generation of businesswomen rises

In Saudi Arabia, the most radical Muslim country in the world, men and women still live in strictly separate worlds - although the end of these conditions seems closer than ever. "Women are the driving force behind the reforms we have fought so long for," they say. A journey beyond the veils of Riyadh - talking to a generation of pioneers.

Shyly, I lock myself up in the aircraft bathroom on the tarmac of Riyadh King Khalid International Airport. My abaya - a black cloak for women – still looks as flattering on me as it did in the mirror at home: my buttocks and breasts disappear under the shapeless polyester cloth, reducing me to a lesser person: one who is not allowed to drive, start a business or travel alone. Without a guardian I cannot enter the country; every step I take, is done with male permission or under the supervision of my superior.

"We have arrived at the Kingdom Tower," says Mohammed, after our car was checked for bombs. The yellow Ferrari of an employee of the flamboyant Prince Alwaleed bin Talal al-Saud is parked in front of the door when I step out of the car and look up admiringly. He owns the media company Rotana, where men and women work side by side and the abaya is prohibited, a kind of Utopia under royal protectorate where the Mutaween, or religious police of Saudi Arabia, are not allowed to come.

Men and women are equal here, "says Mashail Almadi, human resources executive at Rotana. In a sunny conference room on the 58th floor she quietly tells me her story. "We prohibit the abaya in the workplace to promote an ideology of equality." I cannot hide my surprise. According to the Sharia – Islamic law, which is also the constitution of Saudi Arabia - a woman is not allowed to be alone with a man who is not family and she has to follow strict dress codes. Western women have to follow the tyrannical demands of the Mutaween as well. "Cover you face, wear the hijab," a policeman barked when, just for a moment, I was not wearing my headscarf in a public place.

"Few Saudi women want to work here because the prospect of a mixed workplace is a scary thought for them," Mashail continues. "It is contrary to our traditions. For example, my father does not like people to know that I work here." She continues: "At my previous job as an executive at PricewaterhouseCoopers, I wore the niqab because some friends of my dad worked there. I had to uphold the honour of my family out of necessity." She pauses and then says: "We play a leading role in the emancipation of the country." Deeply impressed, I say goodbye in the Saudi tradition: one kiss on the right cheek and two kisses on the left.

The battle of Mishail is supported by King Abdullah. In a speech on national television, he said he thinks women should be allowed to drive, but that he cannot do anything "against the will of his people." And that is where the problem is. Women are sometimes each other's closest enemy. In a poll amongst women, organised by the Saudi government in 2006, 86 percent did not want to work in a mixed environment, while 89 per cent did not want to drive.

But Abdullah is not easily discouraged. Since his appointment in 2005 he annually funds the international studies of 5,000 Saudi students. They study at top schools after which they resolutely return to contribute to Abdullah's quiet (r)evolution. "The culture shock that Saudi students experience during their stay is huge," says Khlood al-Dukheil, managing director of Al-Dukheil Financial Group and alumna of Georgetown University. "My studies in the US opened a new world of opportunities which was previously unknown to me; for the first time I realised that I could achieve anything, even as a woman."

The king also launched the "National Dialogues" a few years ago, a series of meetings that promoted a culture of openness and, for the first time, gave women the opportunity to participate in public debate. "They gave us permission to voice our opinion," says Sabria Jawhar, a Saudi journalist and nominated as 'Most Powerful Arab' in the top 100 of the influential Arabian Business Magazine.

And King Abdullah pushed the limits even further. In 2009 he appointed the first female Vice-Minister in the history of the country, Norah Al-Faiz. Twelve female advisors of the Shura Council, the 156-member parliamentary board of the king, were appointed next. The number of female doctors and lawyers is steadily growing - although a woman still cannot plead or be a judge - and the first mixed university was established. Though some disciplines still remain taboo. "We still are not allowed to issue a master's degree in political science," says Amal Hashem, professor of political sciences at the women's department of King Abdul Aziz University.

Challenges

King Abdullah's motives are not purely altruistic. "The potential productivity profits for the Saudi economy are enormous," says Dr. Saleha Sabedin, deputy dean of the prestigious Dar Al-Hekma College for women, the first Saudi university with US accreditation. Women make up only 6 per cent of the employed population, while more than half of all graduates in Saudi Arabia are ambitious young girls. Up to 30 per cent of the population - half of them younger than 25 - is unemployed. It's a generational time bomb ticking under King Abdullah's policy. A policy that puts women at the centre of the country's necessary political and economic reforms. The challenges are enormous.

"For many companies it is difficult to hire women because of the high costs it entails," says Al-Dukheil. "I had to build separate facilities for them, segregated work spaces and an entrance for women in the office. Details such as toilet facilities are often not even taken into account. That scares off many entrepreneurs." Without a permit from the Ministry of Labour, companies cannot even legally hire women.

Expertise

Starting a business remains difficult without the support of a male partner. "For the rest of my life I will be treated like a minor," begins Habiba Allarakia, an independent consultant with expertise in market research. "As a woman it is quite possible to set up my own business, but for the daily management I must appoint a man. Many women have already been deceived because of this." She loosely drapes her turquoise headscarf over her hair. A pink herringbone pattern on the hem of her black abaya and a zipper in the middle tell me I am in Jeddah. In the port city by the Red Sea dress code restrictions are followed less strictly than in the conservative city of Riyadh. As a commercial city and gateway to Mecca, Jeddah has been experiencing influences of foreign cultures and pilgrims from around the world for over a thousand years. The waves of the sea under the weathered boards of the pontoon where I met Habiba, wash up on the nearby beach, where children and women are enjoying the sun and sweating heavily under the dense fabric of their abayas.

"I started my career in the 90s at a local market research company, which was later bought by Synovate," Habiba goes on. "I worked for them as a contractor, unofficially, because there was no other solution for women at that time. One day I was approached by Procter & Gamble with the attractive proposal to be the first woman - again on a contractual basis - in their offices in Saudi Arabia. That opportunity was one I could not miss."

Habiba explains how their gender diversification strategy and the need for more female expertise in key categories, such as hygiene products, were crucial in their decision. "There they were, talking with six men in a conference room about "female hygiene", and feeling ridiculous." The first years were not easy. "I had to work from home because I could not come to the office; men were not used to working with female colleagues. Their mind-set gradually changed. "I saw how they took in the company's universal values. P&G played a major role in my colleagues' gradual change in attitude."

But Habiba never became a full-fledged employee. Two years later she moved to the regional headquarters in Geneva, to make this possible. A year later the first woman in Saudi Arabia was permanently hired in Jeddah. She briskly stands up and fashions her abaya. "I see it as business attire," she winks. There are more important things to fight for. "Choose your battles, Lisa," she adds wisely.

I ask her about the turmoil in the rest of the Arab world and the increasing tensions around the local 'Day of Rage' - the self-declared day of the revolution in Saudi Arabia. "That is a completely separate issue from women here," she says. "We have nothing to do with it." Her driver drops me off at my hotel. Otherwise it would have been impossible for me to get home; buses and trains are barely available, and taking a taxi, as a woman travelling alone, is strongly discouraged.

Hate mail

Sometimes women revolt against the conservative mindset of their society. But very soon they pay for it. For example, in 1990 a group of prominent women drove a few rebellious laps on the ring road of Riyadh in protest against the driving ban. They were stopped by the Mutaween and lost their job and the little freedom they had left. "My business was destroyed and I had to flee the country," says one of the legendary convoy's drivers.

The young entrepreneur Lama Al-Ghalib, candidate for the prestigious Prince Mohammed bin Fahad Female Youth Leadership Award, also experienced the true wishes of her people when she, at the age of 19, organized a headscarf fashion show with a friend. Under the mentorship of Princess Reema Bandar Al-Saud, CEO of Harvey Nichols Riyadh, she conceived the idea to make the hijab look more attractive to young women in Saudi Arabia. "In the homogenous landscape of the globalising world of fashion there seemed to be no place for modest Muslim dress anymore," she explains passionately. Her message was: "You, too, can be beautiful." The promotional message with her contact information led to a lot of hate mail. She even got death threats. But she remains confident in the future. "Give it time", she assures me; first things first.

There are indeed more important things to fight for than driving or wearing a fashionable headscarf. Princess Banderi Al-Faisal, director of the King Khalid Foundation, shares this opinion: "I am tired of answering the same questions from the Western media over and over again. The abaya is the least of our worries. I am glad I do not have to think about what to wear in the morning. I actually think it is a blessing. "

Even I have to admit to some of the advantages of my abaya. "Sometimes we even go out to have dinner in our pyjamas, not a soul who notices," giggles Hind Mourshed, human resources executive at Saudi Aramco, the world's largest oil company. I almost see it as a kind of national uniform like the thobe – a white tunic – men can wear. Almost.

The compelling voice of Dr. Maha Almuneef, paediatrician and director of the National Family Safety Program, takes me out of my reverie. As a female member of the shura council, she fights for a very

important issue: the approval of the first legislation against domestic violence in Saudi Arabia. She proudly shows me a picture of herself with King Abdullah and points to her American medical school degrees on the walls of her imposing office. "I am trying to make people aware that violence is not just a family problem, but a crime."

The phone rings, followed by a short conversation in Arabic. After the phone call Dr. Almuneef tells me the story of the woman on the other side of the line. "This woman, a simple woman, had the courage to found an association that advocates for the rights of divorced women. And she is not alone. Throughout the country, women lead social initiatives that lead to change." Ten years ago this was impossible. But today, the religious leaders, the muftis, have less power and women have an important place in society. "The attacks of September 11 have made the Saudi people realise the consequences of religious extremism," she explains. This played into the hands of King Abdullah's reformist policies.

I remember the words of Prince Mohammed Al-Faisal, CEO of the Al-Faisaliah Group - one of the largest holding companies in the country. During an interview in his elegant office in Riyadh, where on a plasma screen on the wall continuous news images from CNN appeared, he looked back on the attacks: "A shock wave went through us when the pictures of the 15 Saudi hijackers spread to every corner of the country," he said. "It could have been my son, people thought. Before September 11 every soul could grow a beard and mean something in the religious sphere. Today people think differently. "

Loulwa

I meet Loulwa at the Jeddah Economic Forum, the most important business event of the year, which played a crucial role in the acceptance of women in the Saudi business community. During the three-day conference, key businessmen, politicians and academics from the Middle East meet to discuss the main socio-economic challenges of the region. The next 15 years 7 million additional jobs have to be created to counter the region's rising unemployment - an unemployment rate which has already sparked revolutions elsewhere. In previous editions guest speakers such as Bill Clinton, Steve Forbes, and Helmut Kohl made their appearance.

Loulwa is a Director at Credit Suisse in Saudi Arabia and heads their investment banking department. Her story is characteristic for women from the region. "I was 18 when my father decided I would stay in Riyadh, and would not go to the United States to get my degree. At that time it would have been too dangerous for me as a woman to study abroad, he said. Out of protection he told me not to go. So I chose accounting. Not because it was of any interest to me, but because it was the only decent degree program at King Saud University - which was far worse back then than it is today." She looks at me suggestively. "It has been a while since I stopped wondering what my purpose in life is," she continues. "I grew up in Riyadh. So, being the ambitious young woman I was, I grabbed every opportunity that arose, no matter how small. In my case the answer was accounting."

"I have no recollection of the years that followed. At the university every day was like the next one. It was horribly boring. In my final year at university my father did me a favour: he arranged an internship for me at the bank of an acquaintance. I worked hard and gained the respect of the people around me. Towards the end, I applied for a job: not a marketing position for women - at that time women were only allowed to sell credit products to other women - but a full-time job as an analyst. The department manager told me to forget this folly idea. I answered him that I would make him regret this. My father was furious that evening. I was left all alone in my business endeavours from then on. Shortly after, at a reception at the US Embassy in Riyadh, I met Bob Eichfeld, Manager

Director at the Saudi American Bank, an affiliate of Citibank at the time, who offered me a chance to start as an analyst at the bank. He was my lucky break."

Invisible

Loulwa pauses, takes a sip of her tea, and then tells me about the difficulties she experienced as a woman at the bank. "I had to be invisible in the office building. There were four of us, but it was as if we did not exist. If I wanted to take the elevator, then all the men stepped out first, as if they were afraid of a woman in their midst. One day the human resources manager stormed into my office. "Loulwa," he shouted, "You must hide, the Mutaween are here!" So I crawled under my desk and stayed there until the coast was clear. It took three hours before they left. "

"It was more than annoying that I could not come to the official deal signing ceremony that followed the approval of a new financial instrument - even though I developed it: the guaranteed corporate obligations of the Saudi American Bank (Samba Financial Group) carry my signature." "Were it the men who got all the glory?" I ask. "Of course", is the short answer.

"I still dreamed of one day completing my studies in the US," Loulwa continues. "I secretly prepared my application and collected the recommendation letters I needed. At parties colleagues boasted to my father that I was good at my job. His friends started giving compliments as well. He began to see things in a different light and shortly afterwards he announced that, if I did not get a scholarship, he would fully finance my studies. I was ecstatic. I did not know what came over me. It was like a dream come true. My father actually became my biggest supporter and still encourages me every day." Her eyes radiantly beam at me.

September 11

"But then I got engaged. I had worked closely with before and together we had already completed several projects. When he asked me to marry him, I decided to store my dreams away again. I did not want to lose him." Anxiously I await the rest of her story. "We got married and lived together in an apartment in Riyadh. After several months he was offered a job in America. I wanted to come. I asked my manager if I could be transferred to New York - the city of my dreams - through an exchange programme of the bank, which existed back then. For him this was not a problem; but the partner institution still had to accept me. On September 11, 2001 I had an interview in New York. That has never taken place," she continues. "Three weeks later I received a phone call that I could not work there. I have never known the exact reason, but I suspect that my Saudi identity did not help. Everywhere people lost their jobs in the chaos that followed the Al Qaeda attacks. So I went to study again. Eventually I got my MBA at Columbia Business School." Loulwa's BlackBerry rings. It is the nanny with her daughter, Mariam. Loulwa gets up and ends the interview. "That dream, however small, was fulfilled."

Order

The Jeddah Economic Forum makes women hope for major changes. Moderator Mishal Husein, news anchor at the BBC, directs the debate in a sober suit while some rebellious western women dare enter the conference centre without an abaya. It has not always been that way. "In the beginning we had to sit on the balcony in the dark, so we would certainly not attract any attention," says Amal Hashem, professor in political sciences.

The closing ceremony sets things right. A young woman on stage asks the question of when she will be considered old enough to be able to function without a guardian. Spontaneous cheering swells in

the room. Another wonders when she will be allowed to drive. The cheers result in an euphoric round of applause. The atmosphere begs for historical changes.

But then the governor of Mecca evades their questions. "I leave that to the experts," he says amiably. I hope he does not mean the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, a euphemism for the religious police or Mutaween. The woman next to me begins to cry quietly. "How dare he abuse Islam like this," she sobs. A translucent partition in the middle of the room defines the strict limits of the liberal nature of the forum: for now, men and women are still sitting separately.

After the conference disappointment weighs heavily in the room. "Unbelievable how we are being treated," says Mayan Al-Zawawi, a young woman from the audience. "As if we are idiots. When you write down my name in your article, chances are high I will be sent to prison. But please use my name," she says heroically, "maybe then some things will change around here."