

- Mark your confusion.
- Purposefully annotate the article (1-2 mature, thoughtful responses per page to what the author is saying)
- Write a 250+ word response to the article.

Slowly, more Saudi women find their way into the workplace

by *LA Times*, Adapted by *Newsela Staff*, 9/29/15



At Glowork, a work employment agency, Saudi women help other women find jobs, as recruiters with the agency work the phones on April 16, 2015, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. When one is hired, they ring a bell. Saudi Arabia women are entering the workforce in higher numbers, but they still face many challenges. Photo: Carolyn Cole/Los Angeles Times

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — When Sofana Dahlan decided to become a lawyer, she had to go to Egypt. In her native Saudi Arabia, universities did not allow women to study law.

Nearly 20 years later, she is an accomplished lawyer back home in Saudi Arabia.

Her career is evidence of a slow but profound shift in the ultraconservative Muslim kingdom.

Although women still need the permission of a male relative to attend university, get married or travel abroad, some are taking on new roles in the workplace. In the process, they are gaining a measure of financial independence.

Women cloaked in black, some with only their eyes showing through face veils, are working outside the home more and more. They are working in shops and cafes, offices and boardrooms, and even on some factory assembly lines.

Country Retains Image Of Oppression

The fact that this is not widely recognized outside Saudi Arabia is a source of some irritation to women like Dahlan.

“No matter how successful we are, no matter how much we achieve, the world still chooses to see us as oppressed,” said Dahlan, who proudly wears the body-covering abaya. “In reality, a lot of us are not — we have limitations, but the whole world has limitations to different degrees.”

Saudis attribute the change in attitudes about women in the workplace to a number of factors, including the rising cost of living and the influence of the Internet and social media. They also credit the modernizing efforts of the late King Abdullah, who paid for tens of thousands of young people of both

sexes to study abroad each year.

Khalid Alkhudair founded the women's recruitment agency Glowork after seeing his Western-educated sister struggle to find work.

Companies Under Pressure To Hire Saudis

Many couples, including Alkhudair and his wife, are finding that they need two incomes to afford the lifestyle they want. At the same time, companies are under pressure to hire Saudis to fill quotas demanded by the government.

The so-called Saudization program, an attempt to reduce unemployment among the growing number of young Saudis entering the workforce, has opened doors to women.

The kingdom still has strict laws on segregating the sexes in public, but employers are finding ways to work within these rules.

Companies are putting in partitions to create separate work spaces for women. A few have entire manufacturing plants staffed by women, while others are experimenting with allowing women to work by computer from home.

Progress has been slow, however. Although women now make up more than half the kingdom's university graduates, they account for just 13 percent of the positions held by Saudis in the government and private businesses.

Government, Recruiters Ease Job Search

Saudis typically look to the government for work. For women, that usually means jobs in schools and hospitals — but there are not enough of those to meet the demand. So the government has been easing restrictions and sponsoring training to help women find other kinds of jobs.

Glowork was one of the organizations tapped by the Ministry of Labor to help reduce the number of women on the unemployment rolls. Its recruiters conduct hundreds of interviews a week, matching job seekers with employers willing to hire women.

For many, it will be the first time that they interact with men outside their immediate families, and communication with their employers can be a problem.

So the agency not only coaches them on how to land a job, it also offers advice on how to conduct themselves in the workplace.

Every time the agency places a woman in a job, a gong is rung and the entire office breaks out in applause. Since the agency opened its doors four years ago, the gong has sounded thousands of times.

There has been resistance, however. When Glowork advised one of its first clients, a local supermarket chain, to hire 11 female cashiers, there was a public outcry. A prominent religious cleric, Youssef Ahmed, called on people to stop shopping at the stores, which he claimed were encouraging mingling between the sexes.

“They actually had to let go of these women because of the outcry,” Alkhudair said.

Effort Intense To Overcome Public Resistance

It took intensive lobbying, a social media campaign and a royal decree before women were able to work in retail — starting with lingerie and cosmetics stores.

The fact that women had long been forced to make their most intimate purchases from men was a source of acute discomfort to many.

A law was passed in 2006 requiring that stores catering exclusively to women hire female attendants. However, the law was not enforced, said Reem Asaad, a financial adviser living in Jiddah.

After one particularly humiliating encounter, Asaad's patience finally snapped. A male clerk screamed at her for scraping a sticker off a package of underwear so she could see what style it was.

Looking back, Asaad now suspects that the clerk was afraid of running afoul of the religious police, who would have objected to the depiction of a woman's body on the packaging. At the time, however, she was furious.

She went home and poured her frustration into a Facebook post calling on women to stop shopping at lingerie shops that did not employ women.

Her post struck a chord. Although the campaign to allow women to drive failed to persuade critics, who saw it as an attempt to foist Western values on the country, the so-called lingerie campaign won wide support by emphasizing the desire of women to protect their modesty.

King Abdullah intervened in 2011, issuing a decree requiring the enforcement of the 2006 law.

There are now women working in shopping malls across the country, and not only in the Victoria's Secret stores. "There are even more women behind their desks and behind closed doors running entire retail enterprises," Asaad said.

Possible response options:

- Write a short response to summarize the disagreement between any two people or organizations in the article. If you were to support the claims made by only one of these parties, who would it be? Why?¹
- Choose any passage and respond to it.

¹ This response option is from Newsela.com.