

Saudi Women's Role in Building Bridges

Nimah Ismail Nawwab, Special to Arab News

Unraveling some of the mysteries surrounding Saudi women and producing a better understanding of them and their culture was the theme of a recent meeting in Europe. Entitled the "Saudi-Dutch Cultural Gathering," it was organized by the Dutch Arab Society, the Arabisch Nederlandse Vrouwen Kring (ANVK) and co-sponsored by Saudi Aramco through its Aramco Overseas Company (AOC) offices in Leiden headed by Managing Director Abdalhafidh Nagshabandi.

A number of Saudi women spoke to the group with the aim of building bridges between East and West through the exchange of ideas and through information on cultural, societal and historical issues. Among the 170 people attending were the Dutch Ambassador to Riyadh, Paul Lagendijk, the Saudi Ambassador to Holland, Waleed El-Khereiji, other ambassadors and diplomats, museum directors and various interested individuals.

The gathering began with keynote addresses by ANVK President Dr. Tamador Meihuizen-Hassoun and Abdullatif Al-Othman, executive director of Saudi Aramco Affairs.

Abdullatif Al-Othman referred to the historic links between Saudi Arabia and Holland and Saudi Aramco's 50-year link with Europe through its AOC affiliate office. Ambassador Lagendijk stressed the importance of the meeting. "For some time the gap between the West and the Islamic world has not been narrowing but widening. Many misconceptions exist about Saudi Arabia and these need to be addressed. This meeting can contribute to greater understanding on both sides," he said.

Presentations were made on the role of Saudi women in medicine, education, banking, media, art, photography and literature. The presenters included Dr. Amal Badreldin, Samia Al-Edrisi, Nimah Nawwab, Madeha Al-Ajrourh and Dr. Thuraya Al-Arrayed, who shared their personal experiences with the audience.

Dr. Amal Badreldin, one of the first Saudi women doctors, began with a short introduction to Saudi Arabia, citing educational statistics and women's participation in the medical profession. She spoke of how health care in the Kingdom had evolved.

"In the past it was a combination of natural healing using traditional remedies and natural herbs found in the local environment. Branches, for example, were used as splints for broken bones. As the country developed, so did its health care. When I was a child growing up in Makkah, there was one dispensary with only one doctor in the entire city."

Dr. Amal said that the Ministry of Health as of 2000 employed more than 1,200 women doctors, including 441 general practitioners, 218 dentists, 198 obstetricians and gynecologists, 163 pediatricians, 50 internists and 23 general surgeons.

The challenges that women face were addressed by Samia Al-Edrisi, a Saudi businesswoman from Dhahran. She said that women should change education from a tool of social control to one of individual empowerment and opportunity. She mentioned the rapid increase in educated women during the boom years of the 1970s and 1980s, and said that university enrolment for women increased 132 percent in the 1980s.

Referring to recent statistics, Samia pointed out, “The figures speak for themselves but do not really reveal the passion that I have personally witnessed. This passion drives the young women of my country to excel and succeed. We women, however, despite our passion and the obstacles still before us, have to teach ourselves the importance of patience. We should remember that less than 50 years ago most of our mothers could neither read nor write. We have surely come a long way.”

The role of Saudi women in the media was explained by Nimah Nawwab who deals primarily with a Western audience. She detailed the challenges, the need for media associations and specialized university courses in publishing, layout and the media. She addressed an important point that is often written about — change: “In Saudi Arabia, cultural change is slowly gaining acceptance. The media affects all walks of life and influences women in many ways.”

“The media affects all walks of public life and serves to influence women in many ways. As with all types of evolution, there are those who feel that the negatives outweigh the positives and may resist such change,” Nimah said. “The general feeling is that such change cannot be forced, and its natural realization serves to make it more acceptable, whereas an enforced change that may be seen as coming from an outside influence will hurt society in untold and unexpected ways. The change also has to resonate with what the society itself wants, and not with what others perceive it needs, or coercively wish to impose on it,” she added.

The meeting also featured a slide presentation by the photographer Madeha Al-Ajroush. Among other things, she showed murals and how they reflect the communal work of women in the Kingdom’s southwest, natural dyes and paints used in early paintings, weaving and textiles, patterns commonly used and their significance. The presentation concluded with a review of contemporary art and how communal tribal artistic themes and the environment affect artists.

Madeha went on to discuss the role of photographers. She commented, “My work takes a feminist point of view, but in order to present it, I found myself photographing women wearing traditional clothes living in mud houses leading very traditional lives. The contradictions are obvious and indicate that my link to my country is stronger than to my tribe.”

The photographs were followed by a presentation on women’s contribution to literature by Dr. Thuraya Al-Arrayed, a famous poet. “Compared to the past,” she said, “the present is rich and varied, with more authors, more books published and an acceptance of different styles which leads to more publishing opportunities. It is a scene of colorful coexistence: The classical and the modern and the ultra-modern have no problem finding their reading public.”

Dr. Thuraya concluded with a recitation of one of her own poems, first in Arabic and then in English.

There was also a presentation highlighting various cultural aspects of the Kingdom’s regions. Munirah Al-Ashgar showed a video and delighted the audience by presenting young Saudi girls dressed in the elaborate costumes and bridal jewelry of the Hijaz, the Asir and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. There was in addition an exhibition of prominent Saudi women artists such as Safeya Binzager, Maha Malluh and Fatima Bouhazza.

At the meeting’s conclusion, Gerben Meihuizen, the former Dutch ambassador to Saudi Arabia, commented, “Arab women are very conscious of the value of their rich and glorious past and of their own traditions. These traditions need not block their more active participation in society, to the benefit of their own countries and to that of the Arab and Islamic world in general.”