Globethics Repository



Saudi Women Towards a New Era

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Book
Authors	Fatany, Samar
Publisher	Ghainaa Publications
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-04 03:05:36
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/209984

Samar Fatany

Saudi Women

Towards A New Era

غَيناء للنشر
Ghainaa Publications
First Edition, 2007
Copyright Strictly Reserved For Publisher

To Contact Publisher
e-mail: ghainaabook@hotmail.com
Fax:++96612295019

In the Name of God,
Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Contents

Foreword 7
Editor's Note 9

Section 1: Women and Society 11
A Muslim Identity in Tune with the World 13
Women Hold the Key to Prosperity or Failure 17

Section I1: Women and Media 23
An Opportunity to Empower Women or an Obligation? 25
Changing the Hostile Mindset towards Women 29
Women Journalists Share Experiences Around Med 34
Internet Opens New Paths for Journalism 39

Section II1: Women and Business 43
Saudi Women Taking Board Positions 45
Saudi and Italian Businesswomen: A Partnership for Peace and Progress 50

Section IV: Women and Politics 53
Challenges Facing Saudi Women 55
If Only They Were Given a Chance 59
A Seminar on Political Systems and Democratic Governance 63

Section V: Women and Diplomacy 69
Diplomacy Benefits from Woman's Touch 71
Arab Women Can Power Peace and Progress 75
A Visit to Rural America 79
Epilogue 83

Foreword

I write this book as a Saudi woman with a Muslim identity and a citizen of the world. I represent women with a mission to promote the empowerment of the Saudi female and advocate the global Muslim woman in tune with the world. Our aspirations are many, and the challenges that we face are more.

We have achieved a lot despite the frustrations over the reluctance to change and modernize by a large portion of our society. Consequently, the obstacles that stand in our way are detrimental to the progress of our country. However, there are enough educated and professional women who continue to fight against discrimination and welcome international initiatives available to help women develop their potentials and prosper within the global village.

There are many educated women of this country who are determined to promote and project a progressive image to the world rather than the oppressed or repressed one that has dominated the international media for sometime.

This book outlines Government efforts and the rise of civil society to change negative attitudes towards women. It is a reflection of the emerging role of Saudi women who have been marginalized by rigid traditions and restricted by misinterpretations of Islamic laws.

Samar Fatany

Editor's Note

Samar Fatany probably is best known as a Jeddah broadcaster, but she has also garnered distinction as a member of many Saudi delegations to international conferences of political leaders, journalists and businesswomen.

The text of this book comes from a series of commentaries first published in Arab News, one of the Kingdom's leading English daily newspapers, which examines a variety of issues relating to the emerging role of women in Saudi Arabia.

There is considerable overlap in these commentaries, but they have been divided in five sections, namely society, media, business, politics and diplomacy. Although they have been so divided, the messages overlap because the changing role of Saudi women illustrates that these areas often are intertwined, and a societal decision often has consequences in the workplace or the home, at the ballot box or in the arena of world opinion.

There is a growing realization in Saudi Arabia of the need for change. What Ms. Fatany does in her commentaries is to look for what is truly important in the Kingdom's drive to be an economic winner in a world that globalization is making smaller and to be a faith-based nation where the tenets of Islam are properly preserved while also allowing for progress.

There has been much misinformation about the people of Saudi Arabia in Western media; some may be due to Islamophobia, but some comes from the difficulty in getting an accurate picture of the Kingdom's diversity from the

outside. Therefore, Westerners may find new insights on these pages about Saudi Arabia's growing drive for progress and how that drive requires the people of the Kingdom to find the appropriate balance between contrasting concerns. I don't use the words conflicting concerns because Ms. Fatany sees no conflict between the true tenets of Islam and modernity. In fact, she believes they complement one another.

As with any compilation, it is hoped that readers will find new understanding -- from beyond the Kingdom's borders, an understanding of the complexities of Saudi society; and within the Kingdom, a better understanding of the issues that must be resolved in the National Dialogue in which every Saudi citizen is expected to take part.

Women and Society

A Muslim Identity in Tune With the World

In a meeting with newspaper editors, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah criticized the local press for publication of pictures of women who are inappropriately dressed or who appear in provocative attire.

"One needs to think if he would want his daughter, sister or wife to appear like that," the King said.

Unfortunately, Western media reports misquoted King Abdullah's comments as a call to ban all pictures of women in Saudi media. This was far from the truth.

Photographs of respectable Saudi women continue to appear daily in the local press. However, the king's sentiments are shared by many Saudi families who feel that images of scantily-clad women don't set a good example for our youth and should neither be encouraged nor accepted by our media.

As a concerned mother, I appreciate the King's advice, and I hope the media will continue to respect our Islamic teachings and refrain from publishing indecent pictures of women in our newspapers.

I also read with great interest the news of an Iranian initiative to promote Islamic fashion. I agree with the view of one of the Iranian women members of Parliament that "young people's clothing in the Muslim world does not reflect their Islamic identity, which is really not their fault, since modest modern fashions for women are not available and are not offered by our own designers or popular Western fashion houses today."

I am also of the opinion that we need to encourage our

designers to create fashions that are decent and affordable for our young women to maintain their Muslim code of dress.

We need to promote fashions inspired by traditional patterns and encourage people to avoid incompatible foreign fashions. The aim is to offer clothes that reflect modesty, beauty and diversity and at the same time display cultural independence.

We need to study how to project the image of the Saudi women to the world, but what will be her new look?

The image of a faceless woman shrouded in black does not represent the true discipline of a Muslim woman. It is an image that has been distorted by misinterpretations of Islam and has made the world less respectful of our faithful women. It has portrayed Islam as being suppressive and a religion that deprives women of their basic rights to be respected and admired.

In the West, it has also projected an image leading to backlash against Muslims entrants to society. In the Netherlands, such concerns prompted one young Dutch designer to come up with some headgear for Muslim women that would maintain modesty while allowing them to participate in school activities from which they otherwise would have been excluded.

We need to come up with a new image for the Muslim, Arab or Saudi woman who is proud of her heritage and culture. The hijab is our Muslim identity — let us wear it with elegance and pride. At the same time, as our country is forced to change to compete globally, let's remember that fashions may have to change somewhat to enable both women and men to be effective workers in a variety of situations — not in the name of promoting Western garb, but in promoting economic success for our nation.

Saudi fashion designers need to help create smart, elegant and modest modern fashions for the Saudi woman.

An opportunity to study professional fashion design could be the means to achieve this goal. The opening of a Paris-based Ecole de Mode International (ESMOD) in collaboration with the Fashion Design Institute in Riyadh could provide young Saudi women the opportunity to create their own designs that are suitable to Saudi culture and Muslim identity.

Students will pursue a three-year course that includes drafting, computer-aided design, marketing, live drawing, fashion, culture, communication and textiles.

Moreover, this much-needed career could also provide young graduates work with retailers and as tailors, merchandising assistants as well as fashion designers.

ESMOD has institutes offering master's programs in fashion design and business administration in France, Germany, Norway, China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia and Brazil; now they are most welcome in Saudi Arabia.

The nature of the modern professional character of the Saudi woman should also be considered and studied carefully. If we are to project women in political and leadership positions they should be educated on government policies and made aware of the accepted social conduct and the Muslim perspective in the new emerging political scene among nations. In order to do that, however, we need to develop a Muslim perspective that truly reflects the teachings of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and leaves behind any cultural add-ons that spawn intolerance, hatred or the unnecessary restrictions on women.

With such a consensus, we could start creating a new image for Saudi women so they could assert themselves and their Muslim identities in the world.

The projection of Saudi women today is haphazard and has not been carefully studied. We first need to formulate

a framework that can help the Saudi woman achieve acceptance within her society before we can send her out for international approval in the global village. Women constitute a great, underutilized asset for our economic development, and we need to ensure that we use this incredible resource as wisely as we use our oil or mineral resources, which are administered with the greatest of care.

Critical to our future success is exercising the care required to avoid failures or backlashes that could push back a clock that we cannot afford even to stand still. If we are going to project Arab and Islamic issues on the world stage, we had better be operating with a wide consensus domestically if we wish to have any hopes of success.

Saudi men and women, religious leaders and government officials all need to consider these issues carefully, remembering that is it not the West dictating to us but the world that is challenging us to either take our place near the front of the line with other nations that adapt and progress or at the back of the line with the nations that can't.

The untapped potential of Saudi women can propel us ahead — but only if we let it. Wise deliberations that do not result in resolution will neither be very wise nor very helpful to our shared economic future. Therefore, it is imperative that we arrive at a resolution and put a plan into action to help Saudi women overcome their challenges and succeed — both for their nation and for Islam.

Women Hold the Key to Prosperity or Failure

In many ways, women in Saudi Arabia can be their own worst enemies when it comes to issues regarding their changing role in society. A look at the economic statistics and the important role that women have to play for this society to progress makes many of the challenges obvious, but the obedience many women pay to the status quo and long-standing cultural traditions exact a price on the pace of progress in Saudi Arabia and the acceptance of a new reality that we can embrace -- and watch our children flourish -- or reject -- and watch both our society and standard of living crumble. Ironically, in the worst-case scenario for the future, we would struggle even to feed or clothe our children, let alone defend our culture or traditions.

It is a harsh appraisal and one that I might not have seen fit to voice had I not been asked to present a paper on the topic at the first-ever Forum for Women in Media held in April 2006 in Riyadh.

At the end of my lecture, there were many who criticized my comments, but at the same time there were many others who shared my views and appreciated my efforts to raise a critical issue that remains one of the greatest obstacles in the way of women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia.

Allow me to share with you some of the points that I raised to those ends.

Discord exists between women of differing viewpoints all over the world. In Saudi Arabia, perhaps because of the

extreme levels of conservatism held by some women, the discord seems to be more prevalent.

It is unfortunate to note, but women often oppose their Saudi sisters who call for change and development. For Saudi policy-makers and government officials this creates a major problem. An example of this would be the move to issue separate identity cards to women, which was met with rejection and obstruction of work at government offices and banks as a form of protest. Because of the importance of this change for the march of progress in the Kingdom, the government had to impose the change upon them.

Women's reluctance to embrace the change and opportunities extended to them also is demonstrated by the refusal of women to vote for women candidates running in chamber elections in the Eastern Province, which resulted in failure. Even in Jeddah, it was the men's vote that put women on the board — not the limited support of their sisters.

Across the range of reforms sought to empower women and to give Saudi Arabia a much-needed competitive edge in the global marketplace, from schools and workplaces to hospitals and highways, women often are the ones raising the roadblocks to change.

Some women object to the participation of students in dramatic and literary activities at schools for girls. Without demands by schoolteachers for change, public schoolgirls continue to be deprived of all literary activities.

Despite psychological, hygienic and security concerns about the niqab (veil) raised by doctors and hospital officials, it is women who exert pressure to keep in place this trend. Some female doctors and nurses refuse to heed to these concerns thus compromising their level of efficiency and professionalism and subjecting patients to needless discomfort.

There is a large number of women who oppose women driving in Saudi Arabia. This stand has caused countless problems both for working and nonworking women. As a result, the ban on driving still holds, even though there is nothing in religion that justifies the ban and literally millions of Saudi riyals get taken out of the economy because of the nation's imagined need for drivers, most of them expatriate workers. Women also are to blame for the absence of physical education in schools. Women hard-liners pay no heed to the alarming increase in obesity and diabetes among young Saudi girls that researchers report and that threatens the health of generations to come.

Many women call for the strict enforcement of our strong segregation laws. This culture of isolation applied to women within the family creates social and psychological problems, not the least of which is the fact that depression runs rampant for young boys and girls unable to share the joy of social life with all members of the family.

Extremist religious practices and resistance to modernization by Saudi women have earned the disdain of many women worldwide -- especially from women in Arab and Muslim countries.

Many Muslim women in other countries lament the ignorance of Saudi women, both in terms of Arab and Islamic issues, which compromises the ability of women throughout the Arab world to move forward and do the best for their families and themselves. Instead of being a source of strength to the Muslim world, the position of Saudi women has compromised what should be Saudi Arabia's leading role in the international arena. During the lecture, I made 10 recommendations to remove the obstacles to empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia.

1. Project the correct Islamic teachings on the role of

women in order to dispel the hodgepodge of antiquated tribal customs and traditions that get improperly mixed in with the words of God. The world is populated by men and women who are partners in everything from raising a good family and ensuring a bright future for their children to building an economically and politically strong society.

2. Invite enlightened Islamic scholars to help guide the public back to Islam's declared position on women in the light of the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah, emphasizing the need to protect the Islamic identity of Saudi women while rejecting excesses and deviations.

3. Encourage civil institutions to fight discrimination against women and the tragic problem of domestic violence.

4. Highlight successful Saudi women who have proven their excellence in education, social service, business, media, health and other sectors in order to encourage women to take a more active role in shaping the nation.

5. Take up women's issues and present a true picture of their problems and suffering to officials so that they get a real picture of the challenges, which will help decision-makers set the right course.

6. Raise the levels of education and awareness among women. Women make up half of our society, and they should be empowered to play effective roles in the nation's development and share in the decision-making process.

7. Increase the international role of Saudi women to bring nations closer and promote world peace while encouraging their participation in global conferences and organizations.

8. Allow Saudi women to help correct the widespread misconceptions about Muslim women.

9. Allow Saudi women to promote Arab solidarity by

fostering friendly relations and cooperation between the people of the Arab countries.

10. Saudi media has to work to promote the true, moderate Islamic culture and report on current Islamic trends that honor women and respect their rights. In order to uplift Islamic civilization, we need to find a way to embrace the advancements of modernity rather than rejecting them out of hand.

We need to find a way to end our hatred of change and differences. The media can play an important role in making the case for change, and Saudi women need to play an ever-increasing role in that media. While other societies are forging ahead, we continue to discuss whether progress is a good idea, and each day we fall a little farther behind our contemporaries.

The Forum for Women in Media provided the opportunity for media professionals to discuss the way forward. Media should not be underestimated. Women in media should be both trained and encouraged to mobilize the national base toward reform.

It is important because women have to play an equal role in the decision-making process that will transform our society into a model for other peoples around the world. If we don't make a strong case for change, our society is likely to languish.

Shaping the domestic debate toward positive attitudes and global thinking is a cornerstone of the transformation. It is time for Saudi women - all Saudi women - to realize that they already are making important contributions to the national debate. Whether those contributions will be positive, and speed up the pace of reform, or negative, and send our society and our children closer to a future of poverty, is something all Saudi women need to understand. The global village iswatching; whether it will wait for us is another question.

Women and Media

An Opportunity to Empower Women or an Obligation?

At a time when there is encouragement to discuss a changing role for women in Saudi society, the nation's media is in a unique position to advance those discussions by serving to illuminate our people on the challenges we face in keeping pace with the rest of the world. Some editors and broadcasters may view it as an opportunity, but perhaps it should be viewed as an obligation if we truly want to move the Kingdom forward.

Many challenges stand in the way of the empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia, and our media ought to adopt a strategy to raise the level of awareness and develop the potential of women so that they can better serve their country.

Already there are many women playing important roles in Saudi media, but all Saudi journalists — men and women — need to address these many challenges confronting women. Anyone with a realistic grasp of economics knows that we truly do not have the luxury of time if we want to see a bright and prosperous future for our children; therefore, the challenges facing women today need the media's immediate attention.

What follow are my recommendations to break the logjam of misconceptions and cultural bugaboos that may constitute a greater and more imminent threat to our nation's well-being than any real or imagined foreign enemy.

We need to stress the important role of women in the development and progress of this country and project the national responsibility of allowing women to work in all appropriate economic sectors.

We need to educate men — husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles and others — on the role of working women and the significant contributions of which they are capable because of their education so that all understand the role these Saudi women — wives, mothers, sisters, aunts and others — can play in bringing up a new generation capable of facing modern challenges through rational examination and of improving our standard of living.

We need to educate both men and women about women's legal rights and increase their awareness about the services of governmental and nongovernmental organizations, such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and the National Society for Human Rights, both of which offer protection for the victims of domestic violence and abuse.

Of great importance is the need to expose imposed non-religious values, trends and traditions that perpetuate family violence and deny women the rights Islam guarantees them. It is shameful that family violence is not considered a crime in our country as long as it does not lead to murder.

Media also must encourage respect for dialogue and views of others: Despite the formation of the National Dialogue Center and the encouragement it received from top officials, our society is quick to dismiss opposing views, especially when there are those among us resistant to any change who will block new ideas and brand those who present them as secularists. In such circumstances, the media and the Internet can become weapons of defamation,

preserving a status quo unwilling to admit that the ways of the past do not lead us to a future for which our children will thank us.

The media should emphasize that women are capable of determining their future and that they should share in the decision-making process. We see the negative effects of men being the sole decision-makers on matters related to women. Women account for half of our population, and their ideas and suggestions should command the respect of all, just as men's.

The media needs to expose the outrages perpetuated against women and their children, and the media should serve as a platform calling for new laws to protect women and appropriate mechanisms that support divorced or abandoned mothers and their children. As long these issues are not addressed, the conditions for these struggling families will deteriorate, and some men will treat social and legal inaction as a license for irresponsibility without any fear of reprisal.

Much research is conducted about the Kingdom and its people by sociological, economic and Islamic experts, The media should feature these scientific and theological insights, which can provide people with necessary information to frame their own, reasoned opinions about the challenges we face.

The media also can give the public the benefits received through examining the experiences of other nations and their leaders in dealing with many of the same challenges that our nation faces. The Jeddah Economic Forum has set an example in this respect by inviting world famous women leaders, such as Irish President Mary McAleese, Queen

Rania of Jordan, Dr. Thuraya Obaid of the United Nations and others to its annual forums.

We are now living in a world without borders — a global village. To coexist peacefully nations must work with other parties to identify their roles in this international community.

With a burgeoning, young population, our nation must identify its role in this international community if it is to create a future of economic growth and development with a rising standard of living rather than a declining one. In every country in today's world that is finding success, women are playing an important role.

That is not a matter of conjecture; it is a matter of fact, and the fact is that we need to overcome these obstacles now.

I would hope that simply because we are Muslims we would see the need to empower women in the name of Islamic justice, but even if our thoughts were only to revolve around money and investments we would come to the same conclusion that women need to be empowered if we wish to flourish in this world.

As to whether it is an obligation or simply an opportunity for Saudi media to help move the empowerment of women forward may be a matter for discussion. In my view, however, the leaders of our Kingdom in their wisdom have initiated a national dialogue and also encouraged the media to play a role in that effort, which creates a responsibility — both for the people and the media — to help create a shared, national vision for the future.

It's a responsibility that should not be taken lightly, and it is a responsibility that cannot be ignored.

Changing the Hostile Mindset towards Women

The United Nations Development Program came under some attack for organizing a three-day forum on 17-19 December, 2005, entitled "Women and Millennium Development Goals" in Riyadh. Princess Adila bint Abdullah opened the forum, which included 150 Saudi women educators, social workers, medical experts, economists and media representatives. The meeting was an excellent opportunity for women to discuss their concerns and to highlight their future roles in building our nation. There were those, however, who were very negative with criticisms leveled against participants for representing only the privileged liberal group as opposed to the normal, moderate professional women.

This is a very narrow-minded approach to a meeting that should be of benefit to all women everywhere in the Kingdom. The organizers also were targeted for allegedly attempting to erode our Islamic values and corrupting women by advocating the goals set out in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The fact that Saudi Arabia was among the 100 countries that signed this international document in September 2000 made no difference to those who orchestrated the campaign against the conference.

According to newspaper reports and some Internet sites, the reason behind the resentment was the publication of four

articles in particular that appeared in the official CEDAW document and which are counter to our religious beliefs. At the same time, it is well-known that Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries announced their reservations earlier and made it clear that they would not make changes in line with the four articles.

In addition, Dr. Suhaila Zain Al-Abideen, a member of the National Society for Human Rights, who attended the forum, also reiterated Saudi Arabia's reservations at the beginning of the UNDP forum. She also called upon the UN to advocate the protection of human rights of Palestinian women and Iraqi children. Her presence and her actions were a civilized way of making a statement, which was much appreciated by all the participants. She did not omit thanking the organizers for their initiative, and she participated in the workshops allowing women to voice their concerns and make recommendations about contributing to the nation's development.

It is unfortunate the critics failed to see the UNDP initiative in the proper perspective. This was a well-organized meeting that addressed the empowerment of Saudi women. It also was an attempt to formulate recommendations for policy-makers in order to support the role of women and remove the obstacles that stand in their way.

Hanan Al-Ahmadi, an associate professor at the Institute of Public Administration, gave a presentation concerning women and leadership. She described the negative effects on society when men make decisions on behalf of women – half the population. She called for more power to be granted to women in order to give them the right to decide matters that concern them. The problem, she said, was that

women don't have the means to make their voices heard -- especially when they are excluded from the decision-making process.

One of the most alarming discussions during the meeting dealt with 1,500 cases of domestic violence that have been reported by the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR). The discussions were very frank and offered solutions to many of the problems that women face today. The discussions exposed inadequate courts and incompetent judges who fail to protect women against abuse and discrimination.

NSHR member Jowhara Al-Angary moderated a session on violence against women, and she told the audience that there were many cases of abuse crying out for an immediate change in the laws governing the rights of women. She stressed the need for a codified judicial system, in order to protect women from abuse.

It is rather ironic that the so-called guardians of morality see no reason to be alarmed and fail to use aggressive language in the media or on the Internet when they hear of cases of fathers who sexually abuse their daughters and are then given light sentences or when molested daughters are forced to go back to live in the very environment that led to the abuse in the first place.

It would have been more appropriate for those who oppose initiatives of prominent professional women in our society to direct their attacks against those who abuse women and deprive them of their basic human rights, whether by turning a blind eye to injustices or criminally abusing helpless women. The opponents overlook such blatant violations, yet they become very vocal in targeting UNDP initiatives to address abuse against all women.

The media are responsible for raising the level of awareness among our citizens. The public should recognize that any initiative made for the welfare of our society deserves to be welcomed, regardless of whom is included and who is not. What we all should aspire to is the protection of the rights of all citizens in this country, both male and female. Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah has given directives for the removal of all obstacles standing in the way of women, and he has said that discrimination against women will no longer be tolerated.

The Saudi media have an important role to play in changing the hostile mindset toward women and shaping positive public opinion toward new initiatives for progress and development. There are concerted efforts by responsible Saudis along with governmental and non-governmental institutions and organizations to alter the stereotypes of Saudi women and Saudi society abroad. Unfortunately those who do not want to correct mistaken images work against our gaining the respect of other nations by opposing any improvements and resisting changes for the better. They want to keep the Kingdom isolated from the rest of the civilized world and, at the same time, they are ignorant of the art of dialogue and communication. This is evident when we see the verbal attacks in the media and the Internet against any foreign initiative that they deem "un-Islamic." There is no denying that there are many concerns and issues related to our national security and unjust policies imposed on Arab and Muslim states, but we need to learn to deal with them in a professional manner if we want to be taken seriously and influence solutions.

Reformers will not succeed, and our country will not

develop without changing the extremist mindset and negative attitudes towards opposing views. The media should be an educational tool that can provide guidance and direction to our confused youth who too often receive mixed signals about what is "haraam" (wrong) or what is "halal" (right).

Journalists, columnists, educators and religious leaders have a responsibility to raise the level of awareness among citizens who have been brainwashed for so long and pushed into adopting a rigid and inflexible attitude; part of the problem is that exaggerated suspicions and condemnation are exhibited toward anything that is foreign — since, if it is foreign, it must be wrong. Citizens must also learn to acknowledge the diversity of different nations and other cultures so that we can receive our share of respect, as well. It is essential for the media to educate the public on how to engage with the international community, politically, economically, and culturally. Disrespect for international conventions and disregard for world public opinion will surely have a negative impact on our global standing, and hinder the government's efforts to play a more prominent role around the globe.

Women Journalists Share Experiences Around the Mediterranean

Historically, the great ideas of civilizations have traveled back and forth across the waters of the Mediterranean, and that tradition continued in May 2005, when women journalists from the Mediterranean countries met in Beirut to discuss the way forward.

The conference, "Women, Media and the Mediterranean," was held in May and was organized by ANSAMed and the Arab Italian Women Association (AIWA) in a bid to strengthen the role of women in the world of information, to share experience and build a common vision for media organizations. The event provided an opportunity for dialogue and an exchange of experience between journalists from print media, television and radio from several Mediterranean countries and was attended by many of the region's most prominent journalists.

"The media is the voice of the people," Silvia di Savoia, Duchess of Aosta and AIWA's honorary president, told participants. "We all base our knowledge of others on what the information we get tells us. In a world where information has a growing responsibility, women have a major role, because they are less aggressive and more prone to seek dialogue."

She outlined the aims of AIWA, which are to promote cultural and informational exchanges to overcome prejudices

and preconceptions, which became stronger after Sept. 11, 2001.

"Mediterranean women have a unique opportunity to find a peaceful solution to many problems of cultural, religious and political nature that are often resolved with violence," said Roberto Cantore, the Italian business attaché to Lebanon.

Although many of the participants noted progress throughout the region, some noted obstacles still remain.

"The journalist's role in the Mediterranean states has radically changed in the last few years," said Barbara Serra, of Al-Jazeera's English service. "They have more space but still remain bound to do the same job. It is difficult for them to request a role in management in television, radio or newspapers."

Serra stressed that women's role in the media is fundamental because they represent half the population and can — and must — speak to the people about the people. If the media is the mirror of the population, she said, it is right for women to take positions of more responsibility, which, she noted, is unfortunately not the case in many media organizations.

From the observations of many of the participants, it appeared the problem is widespread.

There are very few women journalists in decision-making positions, though there are many highly qualified and capable columnists, presenters, reporters and talk-show hosts both in political and nonpolitical programs.

Many women journalists have risked their lives to cover wars and conflicts; some have become targets of terrorists. Allow me to share with you some of the statistics and

information about the situations of Mediterranean women in media: In Jordan and Algeria, women have claimed positions of editor in chief, while in France even more women are joining the ranks of journalists, taking 43 percent of all media jobs; however, they still take a disproportionate number of the top positions. Moreover, women are paid less compared to man in the same job.

The media in Spain continues to be dominated by men. According to a recent report, women have 43 percent of all jobs in the media — 63 percent of them have university degrees; male university graduates working in Spanish media account for only 39 percent of the number of men so employed. When it comes to careers, men hold most of the management or directorial positions while women mostly work as editors.

In Egypt, women are underrepresented in the management of state-owned newspapers but hold high-responsibility jobs in television. More importantly wages for men and women are equal. In Morocco, women journalists hold the highest positions and collaborate very well with men. The estimates of the Italian Media Federation show that there are many Italian women working in the media, but they take lower positions in the hierarchy, including part-time contracts.

The situation is similar in Lebanon, where the women working in the sector are an integral part of the greater Arab media world. Lebanese women have played a central role in local and Arab media over the past decades as columnists, presenters, reporters and hosts of political and nonpolitical programs. They paved the way for a new generation of journalists who are integral part of Arab media.

Among the participants were leading newspaper,

radio and television journalists from Italy, Spain, Turkey, Morocco, Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Dubai, including Lebanese Gisela Khovry of TV Arabiya, Turkish columnist Ferai Tinc, Irene Lozano from Spanish ABC, Egyptian Rola Kharsa, Barbara Serra from London Al-Jazeera, Italian journalist Giovanna Botteri and Tiziana Ferrario. We shared our experiences and exchanged views and ideas about making the voices of women better heard on both global issues and those related to women. I was proud to share the achievements of Saudi women in media, both in projecting the new emerging role of women in Saudi society and discussing the challenges they face to become builders of society and promoters of peace.

Among the recommendations of the two-day conference was the establishment of an information network among Mediterranean women in media and the creation of a program to provide training for Mediterranean journalists to give a stronger voice to women and improve their conditions in the region. I hope that Saudi women in media will benefit from these initiatives and work hard to upgrade the level of professionalism in our nation's media.

There is an urgent need to create a more responsible media that can confront the many challenges ahead and serve the development of our society. We need to develop a media that is professional in its approach and able to deal with issues in a specialized and scientific manner. Training and learning from experience both can contribute to upgrading the quality of our journalists.

It is important for our media to promote the culture of dialogue and to encourage citizens to exchange views openly.

There are many concerns that need to be addressed and of which the community should be made aware. The media has a responsibility to play a more active role in projecting our true Islamic values of justice, equality, tolerance and respect for knowledge.

By learning from the experiences of journalists in other nations, we should be able to find better ways to do things, speed up the process of reform and help women take up their rightful role in our society. The sooner, the better. We need all the help we can get.

Internet Opens New Paths for Journalism

Emerging technology is creating interactive channels for mass communication that are redefining media. It is creating a new breed of citizen journalists who can get news to the world without using the well-worn pathways of traditional print and broadcast outlets. It presents great opportunities for common people to report events independent of large media organizations, as well as to voice their views in a new global marketplace of ideas.

These were some of the topics discussed in Dubai during a session on citizen journalism at an event called the Arab and World Media Conference: Getting It Right. The conference was held 5-6 December 2005. At this session, a panel of four media specialists explored the opportunities that new technologies offer. They also debated the various risks that citizen journalism poses to traditional media companies.

Although many of the discussions had a global focus, they also had special relevance for the Middle East, where representative governments and more transparent economic and business environments are creating an increasing demand for information.

Panelists included Alarabiya.net Editor Ammar Bakkar, Eric Case of Google, Pete Clifton from BBC News Interactive, and software creator and analyst John Clippinger. Their audience also included several internationally known media personalities who weighed in during a spirited question-and-answer period.

Bakkar, who also teaches mass communication at the

American University in Sharjah, said that more involvement between everyday people and mainstream media is a matter of continuing importance despite recent technological advances. He noted that many people across the Middle East either lack computer literacy or access to the equipment required for web-based interaction, putting a greater burden on traditional media to become more inclusive of constituent viewpoints.

He also spoke about the value of online interaction, which provides people an opportunity to voice their opinions and express their concerns over current issues and world events. The influence of new media technologies such as weblogs (a.k.a. blogs) and online services allow both professional and citizen journalists to help shape breaking news and influence public opinion.

Case, who has managed the blog-service provider Blogger for Google since 2003, said the weblogs have created an alternative source for news and a new forum for political opinions. Many young Americans have become skeptical of official reports and the existing channels for reporting, prompting them to instead turn to blogs.

He noted that the US invasion of Iraq helped advance the alternative channel, with American soldiers and Iraqi citizens using blogs to report from inside Iraq, writing diaries and describing the reality on the ground while global mainstream media became dominated by propaganda and censorship.

Case said a blog on the Internet gives one the opportunity to voice his or her opinion on the web. It's a place to share things that you find interesting — whether it's a political commentary, a personal diary, or links to websites you want to remember.

Citizen journalism has reached new levels. The BBC's

Clifton said the July 7, 2005, London bombing coverage depended on the reports from people on the scene who provided the network with high-quality photos and videos, as well as e-mailed news material. Clifton said the event signaled the start of a new relationship between the British network and the public.

Today, the BBC continues to encourage people to interact by sending their e-mails and comments, which are aired during programming. Clifton said these new technologies are playing an important role in shaping the news coverage of mainstream media.

The new technology is also bringing new challenges to the tenets of traditional newsgathering organizations. Clippinger stressed the need to come up with proper procedures that can create a healthy online community and citizen media. He said legislation imposed on these new media technologies is not the best solution to create an effective media that serves the citizenry. He said the way forward is to encourage norms of social exchange that will ensure the effectiveness of the technology and the success of the medium's contribution to the public interest.

Ultimately, he said, we have to come up with social protocols that could facilitate the emergence of trusted networks of social, cultural and economic exchanges. His analysis gave the audience a new perspective regarding the trend and revealed how policymakers and strategists view the future of media technology.

There is no clear consensus among the experts. After the panelists' presentations, Danny Schechter, editor of Mediachannel.org, accused them of arrogance for discounting the ability of people to become a force that can create a better media — a media that is neither controlled

nor biased. Schechter, who is working on two new books, "The Death of Media" and "When News Lies," sees no need to control or to channel these opinions or to keep the media accessible only to professionals. He said ordinary people can act as reporters and can be opinion leaders, too.

Among the audience members was a Saudi mass communications student who shared his opinions about Saudi bloggers and online forums. He described the situation as confusing and asked about the social impact of the trend on the Saudi citizen.

Bakkar responded, saying the ethics of the profession should not be compromised. He shared his experiences with bab.com, one of the earliest Arab news portals, and Alarabiya.net. All precautions need to be taken to ensure accuracy and avoid falsehoods, he said, which could subject the organization to lawsuits as well as threaten its credibility.

BBC World anchor Nik Gowing said that although he agrees with the power of citizen journalism, he does not believe it can be taken seriously. He said to indulge in the practice would be chaotic.

Others do not consider it to be an indulgence. Indeed, in the Middle East, where traditional news channels are often tightly controlled and heavily censored, the new trend of interactivity with news consumers and the use of weblogs as information channels may force the established organizations to become more competitive and to aggressively seek the truth.

When mainstream media fails in its responsibility to serve as a voice of the people, people now have alternatives. They may take over the online space and find other, more effective channels to voice their views. This means if traditional journalism is to survive, newsgathering organizations will have to get it right.

Women and Business

Saudi Women Taking Board Positions

The involvement of Saudi women in the decision-making process has been a source of controversy for some time. However, the cultural barriers that have marginalized women are slowly eroding.

Joining the ranks of women elected to boards of directors are Dr. Naela Attar and Dr. Najah Alashri who earlier this year garnered board seats of the Saudi Management Association.

The association has 2,400 members across the Kingdom, 21 percent of them professional women. In early 2006, the Women's Committee of the association held a seminar, called "The Leadership Role of Women on Boards of Directors," to project their services and objectives to the community and to honor four women who won seats on the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce & Industry Board.

Dr. Hanan Alahmadi, head of the association's Riyadh Women's Committee and an associate professor of health administration at the Institute of Public Administration, delivered the keynote address, which emphasized the association's aims to empower and enhance the professional status of women in leadership roles.

Dr. Hanan said research has proven that the absence of managerial qualifications and the failure to implement new management methods are among the major causes for project failure. Therefore, applying managerial expertise

is a basic requirement for the success of any association. Management today has become a science, due in large part to structural changes in the world economy, increased competition, continuous market changes as well as the impact of globalization in the field of business administration.

Dr. Hanan stressed the need for a mechanism to bring together management professionals and business leaders to exchange views and expertise to develop more successful business and managerial models.

She said the association hopes to raise awareness about management skills and to develop the leadership role of women in managerial positions. She urged women to develop their potential in order to achieve both economic and social success.

Dr. Naela Attar, head of the Jeddah Women's Committee in Jeddah and an elected board member of the Saudi Management Association, welcomed the large audience to the event and outlined the objectives and services of the association's Women's Committee. She noted the association's committees across the Kingdom work together to develop the potential of women in leadership positions. Other objectives include the promotion and development of managerial research, enabling managers to take part in the development process, facilitating the exchange of research between related organizations and institutions inside and outside the Kingdom as well as advising groups and assisting them with activities designed to increase managerial performance.

Dr. Naela gave a brief history of the association and noted how it allowed women to run for office earlier this year before the JCCI board elections. As a result, she was

elected to a board post along with Dr. Nagah Alashri who also heads the Research Committee.

Although Saudi women today are highly motivated, Dr. Naela said they still need to develop their potential in order to achieve the best economic and social outcome. She outlined the services of various association committees that organize conferences and conduct workshops to help women reach their potential and a committee that works with media outlets to promote the role of women in leadership positions and to counter opposition to societal development. The association also conducts training programs to develop managerial skills.

"The Saudi Management Association recognizes the leadership role of the four JCCI board members Lama Alsolaiman, Madawi Alhasun, Nashwa Taher and Olfet Qabani," Dr. Naela said in her introduction. "That is why they are with us today — to talk about their achievements and future role."

The four women did an excellent job in sharing their inspiring goals, dreams and objectives with the large audience. Alsolaiman said businesswomen in Saudi Arabia today receive great support. She noted the role of the Khadija Bint Khowailed Center in promoting Saudi women and providing them with training and expert business advice.

She explained the services of the center and the effect of organizing workshops and programs that educate women about their rights and help them take advantage of available business opportunities.

Madawi Alhasun told the audience that women have the potential to lead despite problems that still exist. She said women need to be more determined and to adopt a more positive attitude.

"In order to succeed and achieve our dreams, we must not be pessimistic," Madawi Alhasun said. "We must work hard to develop our potential."

She asked women to follow her example and dream for a better future, not allowing nightmarish obstacles to stand in their way. Madawi Alhasun also advised the women to be innovative and to think of new business niches that offer needed services to the community rather than flood the market in already competitive sectors.

Taher and Qabani spoke about available business opportunities for women in various sectors and briefed them on entry requirements. They advised them to rely on the Khadija Bint Khowailed Center for legal and professional advice that can help them access available means to conduct any business in the Kingdom. They urged them to be informed about government regulation and to understand the legal requirements before starting any business.

During a question-and-answer session, audience member Dr. Nadia Baeshen, who heads the Khadija Bint Khowailed Center, was asked to comment on obstructions businesswomen face in the Kingdom. She noted that despite orders from the Ministry of Labor, many government offices have failed to provide separate sections so that women can conduct their business without middlemen.

The Saudi Management Association has given business and career women a chance for success and access to the knowledge required to achieve it. Let us hope that its path finding efforts encourage more businessmen and government officials to end the stranglehold on women's aspirations that have led to women running for board posts in the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and encouraged other

organizations to allow women to run for board positions, such as the Saudi Journalist Association, which in 2004 elected Nahid Bashatah and Nawal Alrashed to its board; and the Saudi Engineers Council that last month elected Nadia Bakhurji to its 10-member board.

The message to Saudi women is clear. The barriers to success are coming down; the negative attitudes are changing, and it's time for women to take a leading role in the Kingdom's growth and economic development.

Saudi and Italian Businesswomen: A Partnership for Peace and Progress

Italian women take leading roles in their nation's business as well as government. When a delegation of Saudi businesswomen traveled to Rome for a two-day forum, it was an opportunity for women of the two countries to share and learn from each other's experience.

The Saudi-Italian Businesswomen's Forum, held in March 2006, stressed the need for Arab women to assume the role of peacemakers and work across borders to connect with other societies and benefit from the success of others to foster economic and social development.

Judging from the coverage in the Italian media, the forum itself was a great success.

The forum was held under the patronage of Princess Fadwa bint Khaled ibn Abdullah, honorary president of the Arab Italian Women's Association (AIWA).

Founded in May 2002 by a group of professional Italian women and the spouses of Arab ambassadors and diplomats in Italy, AIWA seeks to encourage cultural and social exchange between the Arab world and Italy in order to promote better cooperation and a partnership for peace and progress between the Arab and Italian communities.

Participants in the two-day forum included Arab and Italian women entrepreneurs and investors. The objective of the meeting was to expand knowledge of entrepreneurial

and business skills; outlining each country's laws and customs; and providing the necessary information base to help women in the process of starting their own commercial exchanges, establishing their own business contacts and creating joint ventures.

This forum's goal was to establish ongoing networking, which could prompt a similar forum in Saudi Arabia in the coming months. The forum also garnered support from Rome's chamber of commerce and ANSA Med, a news network of Mediterranean press agencies that encourages dialogue about political, economic, social and cultural issues throughout the region.

The success of the forum was due in large part to the efforts of Princess Fadwa, wife of Prince Muhammad ibn Nawaf, former Saudi ambassador to Italy and now Saudi ambassador to the UK. Her charisma and attitude were a source of inspiration to all the Saudi women who met her. Her initiative in fostering relations between the Italian women and their Saudi counterparts should be commended. Her efforts are in line with the UN Resolution 1335 that recognizes the need for a worldwide initiative to engage women as builders of society and promoters of peace.

The Saudi businesswomen of the delegation truly appreciated Princess Fadwa's work to include them in such international events and to give them an opportunity to help dispel stereotypes of Saudi women as oppressed and isolated.

During their presentation and the two-day interaction with the Italian women, the Saudi women were able to portray a more accurate picture of their status in Saudi society. They also were able to convey the Saudi culture and lifestyle

and backed up their position by marking the achievements of Saudi businesswomen in education, tourism, banking, beauty, fashion, marketing, industry and trade.

The interaction between the Saudi women and leading Italian women in Parliament and business was quite remarkable. The Saudi women were truly inspired by the Italian women who have assumed leadership roles in society.

The forum was one of several events held to promote the association's cause. It was organized in collaboration with the Italian Women Entrepreneurs' Association (AIDDA), the members of which hope to create mutually beneficial business relations between Saudi and Italian businesswomen.

The event provided a unique opportunity for the Saudi women to share their experience with the women of Italy. It is hoped that their visit will create better Saudi-Italian trade relations and more cultural exchanges.

Sharing and learning from the experience of others is the only way forward to build bridges between cultures and to promote viable, long-lasting businesses. We should be optimistic that the knowledge gained in Italy will help the women of Saudi Arabia shape a future of prosperity for the Kingdom.

Women and Politics

Challenges Facing Saudi Women

There are many promising signs that our society is confronting the abuse of women, both in the home and in the hearts and minds of our people; however, many challenges remain.

The newly formed National Society for Human Rights receives and investigates complaints from women whose human rights have been violated. The complaints include physical, sexual, financial and psychological abuse. Social workers have reported stories of women suffering in silence and girls with no alternative but to accept a miserable fate with no hope of avoidance or escape. After many years of denial, our society now is exposing the Saudi men who commit such crimes against women. Islam directed that women be treated with kindness and respect, and there are no extenuating circumstances.

According to sociologists, the reasons that such offenses have gone unchecked are the inefficiencies of our Shariah courts, the absence of law enforcement mechanisms and the unwillingness of society at large even to acknowledge the problem. The government has responded with changes in the judicial system.

Although he admits the changes are necessary and significant, former Riyadh Supreme Court Judge Dr. Yousef Al-Jaber says the judicial system needs further improvements. He has suggested employing sociologists and psychologists

to follow up on cases of domestic violence and to ensure that the abused undergo any needed treatment. He also recommends that the procedures for reporting domestic violence be made easier and the establishment of women's sections in all courts of the Kingdom's 13 districts.

At the same time, the National Society for Human Rights has made plans to provide both a hotline and a shelter for abused women. Regular workshops and lectures around the country are being organized in order to raise awareness of women's legal rights.

Discrimination against women continues to be a major problem. Although women constitute more than 50 percent of the population, their potential is under utilized, and they struggle to regain the rights of equality and justice Shariah law has guaranteed them for more than a thousand years.

Experts say that the best way to increase awareness of rights among Saudi women is to begin educating them at a very early age. Now girls are taught home economics -- not subjects that would equip them to become independent voices and demand God-given rights as men's equals.

The greatest challenges to our society and the greatest threats to Islam are to stop the misguided efforts of some to mislabel old cultural taboos as tenets of our religion, and to make women aware of the fact that they do have a choice -- that they do not have to accept a life of abuse in silence.

We need to change the attitudes of men who view women as "inferior in intelligence and religious thinking." Religious scholars and educators must speak out against men who manipulate women for their own selfish ends. The media also has a role to play and should expose the self-styled "pious" men who advocate the marginalization of

women and use their imaginary superiority as a justification to dictate how women should live.

Recent studies have shown that many women suffer abuse within their families and are desperate for a better life but can find no justice in Shariah courts, and they have no place to turn to for help or assistance. Many endure unspeakable hardships due to poverty and neglect while the self-appointed guardians of morality allege that Islam forbids a woman from seeking work or driving herself to a safe place in order to escape an abusive man.

People remain in our society who adamantly oppose change and insist on following traditions that have no basis at all in Islam. These people interpret Islam in the most unyielding, intolerant and narrow way; as a result, they vehemently oppose the empowerment of women. They believe that women must be kept under the control of male guardians, regardless of those males' manipulative characters or domineering tendencies. The time has come for us to rescue the women who are at the mercy of violent, inhumane or devious male guardians.

Such social issues cry out for immediate resolution. Women's rights must be addressed both by courts and government departments. We must change negative attitudes toward women and reject old customs and traditions that allow discrimination against them -- traditions such as not providing women with the skills and opportunities to earn a decent living. It is equally wrong to hold women virtual prisoners in their homes in a place where there is no dependable public transportation and also a ban against driving.

Laws should be made and publicized, and those who

break them should be publicly punished. Women must be guaranteed security and the kinds of lives that were ordained by God and our religion. Abuse of women can no longer be tolerated in Saudi Arabia if we want to be seen as Muslims who follow the actual Shariah law.

Islam is a moderate religion, and Muslims have a duty to correct the image that has been tarnished by extremists with no respect for a woman's dignity or status. Many extremists resist change and insist on marginalizing the role of women, claiming that Saudi society has a special religious character, and Saudi women should not be compared to women in other countries. For years, the extremists have relied on this ridiculous and baseless argument in order to suppress and isolate women. Those same arguments have hobbled our economic growth and lowered our standard of living.

The majority of young, educated Saudis, both men and women, want to be part of the international community and to contribute to their country's development. They want to initiate changes that will lead to a better nation for all. Educated Saudi women today want to project a progressive international image, rather than the oppressed and repressed one of women who have no voice or opinion in the future of their country or in their own affairs. Saudi women especially should aspire to a leading role among the Muslim women of the world -- a role befitting the women descendants of the Holy Prophet, peace be upon Him, and the women residents of Islam's Two Holy Cities.

If Only They Were Given a Chance

The folly of denying women their political rights was brought home to me during a recent conference in Kuwait where an impressive array of Arab women political and civic leaders gathered to focus on women's political empowerment.

"We have been brainwashed under the banner of tradition and religion, and we have been convinced over the years that as women we are incapable, weak and emotional — that we are not qualified for political participation," said Dr. Rola Dushti, president of the Kuwaiti Economic Society. "The environment has changed, and we will not allow any group to belittle our capabilities and prevent us from exercising our deserved political rights."

Partners in Participation: Women's Regional Campaign School, held in September 2004, brought Arab women together to hone their political acumen through speeches, experience sharing and workshops. Elected officials, Cabinet members, civic leaders and journalists from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, the West Bank/Gaza and Yemen took part in the event.

I was honored to receive an invitation to the event, even though Saudi women are still sidelined in the political process — at least for now. During the course of our discussions I

realized how little we knew of other Arab women and how misinformed many of them were about their Saudi sisters.

Saudi women today are educated, intelligent and capable. However, we do need exposure, experience and training in order to catch up with other Arab and Muslim women who have succeeded in getting the skills and rights to precede us in the political process.

What some of the obstructionists in our own country fail to understand is that this is not just an issue about women's rights but an important keystone for Saudi Arabia to progress and compete with its neighbors — neighbors who already are making use of this competitive edge while some here attempt to ignore the unstoppable forces of change — and the incredible benefits that accompany change.

"Political rights are not just a banner to be held but rather a burden and a responsibility that must be fulfilled and taken with utmost seriousness," Kuwait's first woman cabinet minister, Maasouma Al-Mubarak, said in her keynote address. She also stressed the importance of training and skill sharing between women who wish to participate in the electoral process. Moreover, she emphasized the need to build a regional network between Arab women to guarantee their success in politics over the long term.

Kim Campbell, former prime minister of Canada, urged women not to be deterred by perceived gender notions that obstruct the way of women's participation in politics. She spoke about her own experience as the first woman to hold the post of prime minister in Canada and how she also faced challenges in breaking the stereotypes that restrict women's societal roles.

Algerian MP Samia Moualfi and Moroccan MP Amina Ouchelh spoke about their political roles and the challenges

that confront women in their countries. The members of parliament shared their political experience and revealed how Algerian and Moroccan women are much more advanced in political participation. Their speeches were enriching and inspiring. Each member of the two delegations represented different parties in their government. The respect they had for each other and the sophisticated dialogue between them truly was impressive.

Participants, presenters and workshop trainers also took part in a series of panel discussions addressing key issues relating to the promotion of the participation of Arab women in political life. Many of the candidates, who participated in election campaigns in their own countries, appreciated the training that could strengthen their political skills. Others hoped to improve their ability to participate in civil and political affairs.

Woman after woman from across the Arab world told the participants of her challenges and her successes. They all shared a common conviction that they could — and should — play a key role in solving the problems of today and helping to shape the future of their societies.

I met young Lebanese women who shared their experiences of fighting — and failing — to lower the voting age to 18. However, they are still determined to try again and work on changing the legislation.

I met Palestinian women who intend to gain the power to make a difference in a new Palestinian state and to be part of the decision-making process — women who have suffered a great deal under Israeli brutality and occupation but are still hopeful and eager to rebuild their destroyed communities.

There were Iraqi women who spoke about their determination to fight for a united Iraq under a democratic rule that respects all Iraqis as equal citizens.

Women from Yemen talked about their fight to regain their right to participate in Shariah courts — a right that was taken away from them at one point by extremists who cast doubt on their abilities.

I also met women from Oman who are participants in the Shoura and hold other governmental posts.

Listening to these inspiring speeches and attending the workshops on building political skills as well as interacting with politically active Arab women leaders with similar societies was an eye-opener.

The voices of women in Saudi Arabia should be heard and respected as capable citizens and legal participants in the decision-making process. To gain legal and political rights is not un-Islamic, and there are many examples in history of Arab and Muslim women leaders who were politically active and who have left their marks in their societies and who have had their names forever etched in the annals of history.

Participating in this historic event renewed my hope for the future and left me with the conviction that Saudi women can add much more for their country's progress if only they are given the chance.

A Seminar on Political Systems and Democratic Governance

In July, 2005 I was recently invited to participate in a seminar on political systems and local governance, and I was asked to moderate a session on strengthening civil society and women's participation. Before I accepted the invitation from the Club of Madrid in cooperation with the National Institute for International Affairs, I did some research on the organizations that I would like to share with you so that you can also appreciate the principles of their agendas.

They both are independent organizations promoting international cooperation to build political and civic organizations and strengthening democracy in every region of the world. The members of the Club of Madrid are 57 former presidents and prime ministers of democratic countries who act as a consulting body for governments, democratic leaders and individuals with initiatives to promote democracy and international cooperation. Their agenda is for action from governments, institutions, civil society, the media and individuals to promote a global democratic response to issues that threaten the world.

According to the charter of the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), "The institute does not presume to impose solutions nor does it believe that one democratic system can be replicated elsewhere. Rather, NDI shares experiences and offers a range of options so that

leaders can adapt those practices and institutions that may work best in their own political environment."

The three-day seminar included participants from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Lebanon and Morocco, and we were all privileged to hear from former heads of state and experienced politicians who shared their experiences and world perspectives.

The opening session was chaired by Kim Campell, former prime minister of Canada and secretary general of the Club of Madrid, with NDI president Ken Wollack. We then listened to presentations from Spanish senators and former mayors outlining the role of municipal counci1s in sharing community concerns with the state.

Senator Beccerril, former Spanish minister of culture and mayor of Seville, gave an inspiring presentation of the role of municipalities and their relations with government. She explained the role of professional civil servants and advisers in addressing community concerns and service needs. She described how the municipal movement called upon the Spanish Government to enact decrees so that local councils could get money from the state budget to implement much-needed services to develop cities and provide better conditions so that citizens could live in a decent, healthy and comfortable environment.

Felipe Gonzalez, former president of the Spanish government, delivered one of the most interesting presentations to follow. He discussed his role in the Spanish transition and talked about his special relationship with the King. He noted that the wisdom of the King facilitated an easy and peaceful democratic transition that endeared him to the people in Spain. He also said the aspirations of Spanish

society to join the EU, the support of the business elite and the empowerment of the weak were other important factors.

Gonzalez emphasized that interaction between the international community and the Spanish people along with the cooperation between religious and political leaders helped Spain reach the consensus that allowed a peaceful democratic process based on reason.

Another interesting session dealt with recent experiences of political change in the Arab world. Idriss Lachgar of Morocco, Elie Khoury of Lebanon and Ibrahim Hussain of Bahrain presented brilliant presentations of their countries' experiences moving toward democracy and identified similarities and differences as well as critical factors detrimental to change, such as factional divisions.

Faiza Amba, who reports on Saudi Arabia for the Christian Science Monitor, spoke about the Kingdom's reform movement and the positive changes she has witnessed in the Kingdom since returning after an absence of three years. She said there was optimism and dynamism that filled the country and a genuine move toward change.

Sadiq Al-Mahdi, a club member and former prime minister of Sudan, gave a detailed analysis of the political and economic challenges in the Arab world. He discussed the successes and failures and the way to move forward with political reforms. He said what is delaying political reform in the Arab world is the lack of political initiatives among the citizens and the absence of mechanisms to ensure democratic practices. There is a need to enhance cooperation and communication among the democratic proponents in the Arab countries. There also should be a dialogue between

the governments and citizenry to introduce the democratic process peacefully without creating a conflict or resorting to violence.

Dr. Ibrahim Al-Quayid, an elected member of the Riyadh Municipal Council, spoke about the recent Saudi experiences with municipal elections and outlined the council's role and responsibilities with regard to Saudi political reforms. He said there is a need to capitalize on gains made and to push further to institute the democratic process.

Jaafar Al-Shayeb, an elected member of Al-Qatif municipality and a member of the National Dialogue Center, discussed political and legal reforms in the Kingdom. He reiterated that international expertise and advice from reputable organizations are necessary to help Saudis succeed in the election experience, emphasizing the need for voter education at this stage. He said the Kingdom needs to strengthen its civil society and develop non-governmental organizations.

Abdullah Hassan Abdulbaqi, a former Saudi-British banker, moderated the Plenary session that discussed the main findings of the groups discussions. He spoke about the current challenges facing the Kingdom, and he also reiterated the need for international assistance and expertise to support citizen participation in the decision-making process.

During the group discussion on strengthening civil society and women's participation, I had the opportunity to present some of the challenges facing Saudi women and the government's efforts to promote the status of women. Using the advice of Prime Minister Gonzalez to take advantage of the pockets of freedom available, I

stressed the opportunities that Saudi women must take to resist extremism and discrimination aimed at them by some elements of society. At this stage, it is up to women to demand their legal rights and to voice their concerns. As a journalist, I genuinely believe that the media in Saudi Arabia can play a more important role in raising the level of awareness among citizens and educating women about their legal rights. The Human Rights organization in the Kingdom continues to expose many violations and abuses against women, and the media highlights the ineffectiveness of the courts. The pressure from both the media and the human rights organization has prompted efforts from the government to implement much needed judicial reforms. Moreover, the newly formed Center for National Dialogue is an attempt to bring together people of different views and attitudes to address social and political concerns in our society so that we can reach a consensus that hopefully will facilitate reforms.

Sen. Beninger, former Chilean presidential minister, spoke of six domestic prerequisites for the implementation of reforms.

He stressed the importance of building a political culture, the promotion of civil society and pressure from the international community to force governments to implement reforms.

He said windows of opportunity always should be used to allow for a peaceful transition -- not through confrontation and conflict.

Beninger said the media should convey a positive message about building the future. He spoke of a peaceful transition to democracy through social force and social pressure.

He said in Chile that the only respectable power was the

church; therefore, it played a very important role. This is also the case in Saudi Arabia, and there should be cooperation between religious leaders and moderates to generate an atmosphere that nurtures democratic freedom and political reform.

Diego Lopez Garrido, a socialist member of Spain's parliament, chaired a session on comparative experiences on assistance for reform and democratic development. He said democracy cannot be imported or exported. It is the demand of the civil society in any country that facilitates the democratic process. External support and expertise through trade unions as well as the media help a great deal. Twin-city relationships based on friendships between two cities are tools that can help municipal councils carry out governance more professionally and efficiently. Regional integration in Europe and a bid for membership in the European Community helped consolidate democracy and proved to be incredibly powerful in the transition to democracy in Spain.

Listening to the experiences of others who have gone through this process of peaceful democratic change made me realize how important it is for Saudi Arabia to end the isolation that has slowed its development and delayed the process of reform and modernization. It would be very unfortunate if we cannot benefit from international institutions, share our experiences with others, seek advice and request guidance on mechanisms that advance democratic values, practices and institutions.

Saudi Arabia is a peaceful country that faces many challenges to modernize and achieve prosperity and stability. I am sure we all can appreciate the role that friendly organizations can play in supporting the reform movement in the Kingdom today.

Women and Diplomacy

Diplomacy Benefits from Woman's Touch

Confident and capable Saudi professional women taking part in international delegations are dispelling long-held stereotypes of women here as being uneducated and dull.

The recent visit of Saudi Arabian professional women to Hong Kong in a delegation headed by Princess Loulwah Al-Faisal had a great impact on the business community and society. Their qualifications and level of professionalism impressed all who met them. Many business contacts were made; deals were signed, and many future business prospects discussed. The delegation, which garnered intense newspaper and television coverage, met with Hong Kong's community and business leaders.

The enthusiastic welcome given to the delegation was very encouraging. The delegation met with members of the Council of the Hong Kong Federation of Women. The exchange of views and knowledge sharing about community and women's issues was very fruitful. The fact that the visit to Hong Kong coincided with the International Women's Day also helped place the Saudi delegation in the spotlight.

Speakers presented many business prospects and opportunities during a visit to the chamber of commerce and the Council of International Trade. The visit to Hong Kong

University was equally rewarding. Faculty and students greeted the delegates as the university band played. The Saudi professional women answered many questions about Saudi society and the role of professional women that need to be clarified in order to present a more accurate view of Saudi women and society today.

The success of this particular venture, which was organized by SAGIA, is attributed to the selection of the delegation, which included academics, businesswomen, financiers and media consultants. Their attitude and sophistication played a major role in creating a positive interaction between Hong Kong business and community leaders and the Saudi delegation.

Jawaher Al-Sudairy, the talented and efficient SAGIA representative, deserves all kudos for excellent organization. The members of the high-profile delegation included:

• Princess Loulwah Al-Faisal, vice chair and general supervisor of the Effat College Board of Trustees, president and chair of the Board of Trustees of Al-Maharat Cognitive and Skill Development Center and a member of Al-Nahdah Philanthropic Society for Women.

• Princess Mashael bint Faisal bin Turki, educator and provider of two popular schools in the Eastern Province. She is CEO of Idrak Training Co. with an interest in upgrading Saudi management policies in the Kingdom. She also is a member of the Businesswomen's Association and is active in promoting and assisting businesswomen to create innovative business enterprises.

• Noura bint Turki Al-Faisal, assistant to the vice

chairman of the Board of Trustees and general supervisor of Effat College and Dar Al-Hanan School.

• Samira Al-Sowaigh, businesswoman from the Eastern Province, shareholder of Al-Moaibed Co. that specializes in paper production and trade and a member of the Businesswomen's Association. She is also the owner and general manager of Attala Commercial Services Co., which specializes in media, public relations and product promotion.

• Dr. Haifa Jamal Allail, dean of Effat College.

• Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan, cofounder of Yibreen Ladies Spa.

• Lama Al-Sulaiman, board member of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

• Ghada F. Al-Tobaishi, deputy general manager, Attala Commercial Services and Advertising Company. She has 20 years of experience in the field of media, PR, event organizing and marketing. Ghada has successfully launched many international and local events and conducted exceptional advertising campaigns in the Kingdom. She has wide international contacts and communication skills that have made her a prominent personality in the field of PR and marketing.

• Mishael Al-Dabaan, investment banker of the HSBC Saudi Office.

• Sara Siraj, relationship manager, Corporate Banking, SABB.

• Mina Al-Oraibi, a journalist for Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper.

The futures of these talented women look very promising, and their input as delegates was invaluable.

The role of such delegations should not be underestimated. Fostering cultural relations as well as boosting business cooperation is the way to achieve global peace and prosperity. The international business community can play a role by building bridges between different cultures and influencing decision-makers to create better policies that end conflicts and wars.

Let us hope that more Saudi women will be asked to join business delegations and become more active members of the global community. Diplomacy benefits from a woman's touch.

Arab Women Can Power Peace and Progress

Politicians have failed to bring about peace in many parts of the world. The Arab world in particular has suffered the most. There are many reasons behind the failed diplomacy. One of them is the absence of women in negotiations for peace.

The 2006 Jeddah Economic Forum focused more on the global role of women and their contributions to economic change. Women delegates presented the future vision of women and emphasized the importance of engaging women as builders of society and promoters of peace.

One of the most interesting lectures was delivered by Haifa Al-Kaylani, founder and chairman of the UK-based Arab International Women's Forum. She stressed the need for Arab women to assume the role of peacemakers and work across borders to connect with other societies and benefit from the successes of others to foster economic and social development. According to her, we must build bridges and build businesses, which require collaboration between government and civil society as well as policies to regulate the social, political and economic environment.

Al-Kaylani said when women prosper, families and communities prosper. Educational attainment is the key to empowerment, and women can be the engines of change and development. She said we live in a world without borders, and the Arab world is at the heart of the globalized economy.

Arabs are expected to work hard and strive to negotiate with partners across borders to establish their role in the global village. For women to take part in this transformation, they need to master business and information technology to speak to the world.

Arab women have a lot to offer, Al-Kaylani said. They possess a rich culture and heritage unknown to the rest of the world, which prompt a need to create greater public awareness about Arab women's successes and achievements. Arab women can play a greater role building bridges of understanding to connect with other cultures. They need to network within the region and beyond to the international community and both contribute to and benefit from that cross-cultural enrichment.

The region has suffered from civil and regional wars. Women always suffer the most, and they strive to keep the families together and maintain a healthy spirit in their homes.

After her speech, I asked her how can Arab women play a more active role as peacemakers and work across borders, to which she replied that empowerment is the key and that they need educational access and a voice in governance.

Women so empowered can take an active role in ending hostilities, first and foremost by raising the next generation. If educated and enlightened they will be able to teach their children the importance of dialogue, opening channels to present their positions — but not in a combative manner.

Peaceful ways and means can be the weapons to end wars. Educated mothers can do that. Instead of having men negotiate settlements, why not allow those who suffer the most to resolve these conflicts?

Al-Kaylani mentioned UN Resolution 1335, which stipulates

that women should be involved in peace processes and participate in peace negotiations next to men. Women should no longer be viewed as victims but as promoters of peace instead.

The launch of this initiative in the Arab world in 2002 by Suzan Mubarak of the Geneva- and Cairo-based International Women for Peace was designed to find ways to empower women across the Arab region and women in war-ravaged areas, such as Palestine, Iraq, Sudan and Algeria, all of which have endured civil strife. Even in wars between nations women can teach the culture of peace and build bridges of understanding.

She added that conferences, seminars and the media can be used to promote these ideas, noting that her next stop after Jeddah would be Alexandria, Egypt, for the launch of the first institute for peace studies in the Middle East under the umbrella of the Suzan Mubarak International Women for Peace.

An equally inspiring Arab woman who I met during the forum was Farah Daghustani who attended all three days and shared her views on this worldwide initiative to engage women as builders of society and promoters of peace.

Educated in Amman, Jordan, she earned a bachelor's degree in modern Middle Eastern studies and Islamic history at Oxford; later she completed a master's degree in public administration at the Kennedy School of Government. She now serves as executive director of the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development. As impressive as her credentials are her eloquence and sophistication and peaceful manner.

Daghustani praised the Saudi women who are assuming leadership roles in society and hoped for more cooperation and networking between Jordanian and Saudi women. She

said sharing and learning from the experiences of other Arab women would be very rewarding. She said such interactions were often overlooked as people tend to look to the West for models of reform and progress.

"Of course, there is a lot that we can learn from the Western experience," Daghustani said, "but we have to develop our own methodology that caters to our traditional values and way of life." She added that we need to generate new ideas and strategies to allow Arab women to connect and come up with programs to benefit all.

One such program, she said, is the cooperation between the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development and the Khadija bint Khuwailed Center to build home businesses for enterprising Saudi women.

Daghustani said her organization was established in the late 1970s. It focuses on community development and includes programs ranging from health care to political participation. The objectives are to reach women in remote areas and to communicate with women across borders to find the best methods to assist those in dire need. She said Arab women can work together to dispel stereotypes and achieve tangible results as more active promoters of peace.

Al-Kaylani's words and Daghustani's comments were very instructive. The challenges facing the Arab world are many, and the impediments facing Arab women remain. However, with such initiatives and a clear vision for peace, the future looks more promising. Empowering Arab women today could spare the region a lot of pain tomorrow.

Will Arab women be given the opportunity to be active promoters of peace? And will Saudi women find their place at the negotiating table? Those two questions remain unanswered.

A Visit to Rural America

The Committee for Development of International Trade of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry sponsored an outreach program in several American cities in Tennessee in July 2005.

I was accompanied by my daughter, Sara, on a program of visits to civic organizations and media organizations to discuss Saudi-US relations, developments in the Middle East and the Kingdom and other issues of the day.

The three-day program traveled more than 600 miles through Central Tennessee, including visits to three Rotary Clubs – consisting of about 250 people, two daily newspapers, one radio show, one television show and one social reception.

We were escorted by Patrick Ryan, editor of the Saudi-US Relations Information Service and a resident of Central Tennessee.

We met with community leaders and opinion leaders – politicians, academics, lawyers, doctors and business people.

It was quite an experience to visit rural America and get acquainted with the people I have read about in novels and history books. I didn't know what kind of reception to expect and was a little apprehensive; for I was under the impression that the South represented the hardliners – people who believe that Muslims are their enemies and

Saudi Arabia is a breeding ground for terrorism. I was invited to speak at several Rotary Clubs across Tennessee -- in Murfreesboro, Cookeville and Smyrna.

My daughter accompanied me, and, like any teen-ager, she tends to be very observant and quick to criticize, and I was a little worried that she would get bored. However, to my pleasant surprise I saw her enjoying the events and even paying attention to what was being said and discussed. Although politics is not her favorite subject, she still appreciated my efforts to project the true image of Saudi Arabia. In my speeches I tried to present the human side of Saudis and explain the challenges of reforms and the threat of terrorism that Saudis also have to endure. Sara never tired of listening to me repeat the same speech time and again. In fact, I would find her reminding me of what I had missed to say the second time around. I guess it was important for her to have the respect and trust of the American people as she has grown up enjoying their jokes, songs and movies. Since she was four, Sara visited the States every summer. Her brothers and sisters went to school in Virginia and Boston and have had beautiful memories of friendships, classes and teachers, and had great times visiting shopping malls along with Disney Land and Sea World.

In my speeches, I explained to the Rotarians that the Saudi people realize the difference between the US foreign policies and the American people. We respect American values of human rights, freedom of speech and justice for all.

The Rotarians impressed me with their sense of patriotism and faith.

I could relate to their Christian habits of beginning their

events with a prayer as we Muslims start everything in the name of Allah.

They also swore allegiance to the flag on every occasion all in one voice which I thought they did with great enthusiasm and pride. Maybe that could explain why they would tend to be more aggressive and somewhat intolerant than others when they feel that their country was being threatened or attacked. I felt I needed to ease their fears and correct their misconceptions. The message in my speech was that the Muslims are not enemies to Christians, Jews or Americans. We pray five times a day to the descendants of Abraham, Jesus and Moses and there is a whole chapter in the Qur'an on the Virgin Mary. The Jews have lived among Muslims before the creation of Israel and were never discriminated against until they decided to rob Palestinians of their land. They had safe havens in Arab lands when Hitler planned the Holocaust. The conflict in the Middle East is politically motivated. Politicians have failed to achieve the peace.

Extremists have taken over the lives of Christians, Jews and Muslims alike, and we, the silent majority, are being manipulated for the selfish gains of political leaders who only have their own interests in mind. We are not the decision makers, and our religions don't preach hatred and bigotry. We need to embrace our shared values of peace, love and the brotherhood of man.

No devout Muslim will forsake his religion because of acts of terrorism that are committed by some who claim to be Muslims. And no pious Christian will abandon his religion for the likes of Timothy McVeigh or for the sake of those who bomb abortion clinics in the name of Christianity. There are also many Jewish people who believe that the

Palestinians have a right to exist.

The threat of terrorism is not only in the United States. Saudi Arabia is also a victim. It pains me to hear that the American people believe that Muslim Scholars have not condemned terrorism and that Saudi Arabia is willingly funding the terrorists. The truth is the majority of Muslims scholars have condemned and condemned but their condemnation never reaches the American people. The Friday sermon in Saudi Arabia is translated into English every week for the benefit of the Western audience who refuse to believe that terrorism is condemned and rejected by all Muslims and is UnIslamic.

Islam is a peaceful religion and the Saudi people hold no animosity toward anyone. Saudi Arabia is moving forward with reform and needs the support of its friends and allies to make it succeed. It needs the cooperation of US and international security forces to win the battle against terrorism that is threatening our progress and development. I know we have friends in America, and this trip has shown me how Americans are still the warm and friendly people that I have always known. Even in Tennessee, my daughter and I were received with warmth and respect. Their hospitality was overwhelming. Our host, Patrick Ryan, and his family and friends have shown us great hospitality that will be difficult to reciprocate.

I am now back in Saudi Arabia, and I shall always remember beautiful Tennessee and the wonderful people who I have met and learned to respect.

Epilogue
The National Dialogue

In the history of mankind, the leaders who have encouraged the input of the people are relatively few. We have been given one of those rare chances by our leaders to take part in the ongoing National Dialogue, and we are blessed to get the chance to voice our views and listen to others to forge a collective new way forward

The dialogue is hoped to give us all the chance to understand the obstacles we face on the road to a bright future, and it gives us the chance to help

shape that future. It is likely that central issues will emerge that we as a people will have to confront -- and resolve.

It will require resolve on all our parts to open our minds both to the harsh realities of today and exciting future plans. It will require us to consider many things we have not considered before, and it will require all of us to keep an open mind to the ideas we hear.

Saudi Arabia is the heart of Islam and just as our King is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, so are all of us the ambassadors of Islam -- to a wide variety of cultures with a wide variety of traditions and customs. We must find a way for the world to respect our customs and for us to respect theirs.

Islam can become both esteemed and great in the ages to

come if it again returns to the forefront of science, medicine and technology. Our country will flourish with universities and domestic economic activity; it won't without them.

We all need to help chart the course -- to find the path -- to the future, and we all need to listen to what others have to say -- and not summarily dismiss any idea that comes forward.

All the holy books of the Abrahamic faiths suggest that you should leave the world a better place where your children will flourish; in that regard, I am sure we have little disagreement.

The goal is to blaze a new trail, and to lead our people -- and the Ummah -- to greatness once again.