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Are Women's Roles Changing in Oman?

Andrew Miller

Abstract

This is an exploratory research project on Omani women's roles changing in the household. To start off, tradition will be defined by the definition I followed throughout my paper. Following that, I will explore what is women's traditional role within the household. Next, information will be presented that will discuss major steps women have taken in education, employment, and gaining skills for the workplace. These points will be followed up with statistics and an explanation of each table. These tables examine the data of women's education, freedom, encouragement to work, and overall skills they are gaining. You will read about workshops that the government and world are sponsoring in order to bring forth women in the workplace in Oman. While researching, I did keep in mind counter arguments, which will be addressed as well. In conclusion, I have found more employed women than what I originally thought and they also dominate certain job fields. Additionally, moving forward, I will discuss how to encourage women to work more with providing accessible daycares.

Introduction

“Middle Eastern women have been portrayed by Westerners as silent shadows or helpless victims of suppressive customs and traditions who are unable to organize or form groups on their own and for themselves” (Khaduri, 2007). Women’s contributions to finances in the Western world are drastically different than women in the East. Western women help provide for the family, if not more, than their male counter part and they are much more independent than Eastern women.

Since the 1970s, Oman has seen a major increase in wealth due to the findings of oil and the benevolent leader, Sultan Qaboos, modernizing the country. Changes include: education, medical facilities, government policies, and increasing women’s participation in leadership, along with other major contributions. In the past 40 years Oman has witnessed an increase in income, jobs, and international influence because of its close proximity to the Indian Ocean.

Sultan Qaboos has pushed for more women to be involved in this newly transformed country that is currently experiencing a period modernization. Because of modernization, women are increasingly becoming more significant in work places. Overall, women are working more, becoming more educated, increasing activity within the local and national government, and helping the future of Oman with their new involvement; consequently this is causing women’s roles to change in the household.

What is Tradition?

Definition:

There are many definitions of tradition. For the purposes of this research, tradition refers to, “a way of thinking, behaving, or doing something that has been used by the people in a particular group, family, society, etc.: the stories and beliefs that have been part of the culture or group of people for a long time” (Merriam-webster.com, 2014).

Background:

Are women’s roles in Oman considered traditional? Usually, women are expected to manage household needs and raise the children. Meanwhile, the husband works and provides for the family, which is a traditional gender role custom in general. “Legally the women don’t have to work” (anonymous interviewee, 2014). Men are the providers and make up the majority of the work force in Oman, but where do women fall into place currently? “The majority of, if not all, men expect to be patriarchs at some time in their life cycle; no female holds any formal public position of significant power” (Rippenburg, 1998).

Other than the female’s husbands and direct family (mahrem), women do not directly engage with other male figures. Even though the country is known for keeping tradition, modern ideals are slowly being accepted, which will be discussed further into the paper. Oman is holding on to core values distilled in their Islamic tradition of Ibadhism, and until the past 40 years, women have not been a major contributor to the Omani woke force.

Women have not held a powerful position within the government or an established institution in Oman until recently, but they still have an influence among the family. The wives influenced the males in the household even though the man has the overall authority. “Women may influence their male patriarch within the household informally, but this is their only avenue to power” (Rippenburg, 1998). Even though women may only have a small amount of power in a traditional household, the roles of women are becoming more important in the nation building of Oman.

The role of women is to be the household presence because the male is normally working for the majority of the week. Males will work Sunday through Thursday out of the village; this allows women to be the authority until he arrives home. Women’s roles in a traditional Omani home will change even more than in the 1970s as time continues and Omani women will see more opportunities presented than before Sultan Qaboos took over the country. If women were

given more chances to work, would the power within the household shift? In addition, who is home to take care of the kids during the day?

Change

Education for Women:

The number of schools has increased and this is evident since Sultan Qaboos took over in the 1970s. Education was made a major project within the country, along with modernizing the poorly developed state, and giving children a better chance to contribute to the Omani society by working. Rural areas of Oman are seeing a growth in access to schools and in return, expanded education is reaching all parts of Oman. Along with more educational opportunities, universities are seeing more women studying abroad to learn in a different environment. The Omani education system is investing in men and women all across the country, to extend their education outside of Oman. “Women have to negotiate and be more open minded of new education opportunities. I would encourage women to study abroad and go outside of Oman” (Maryam, 2014).

Table 1

Women Studying Abroad by Country (2005/2006)

(Khaduri, 2007)

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| United States | 38 |
| Canada | 40 |
| Australia | 49 |
| United Kingdom | 136 |
| Arab Countries | 4 |
| GCC | 402 |

Along with development of secondary schools, universities have become readily available to students who are looking to continue education after secondary school (high school). Schools not only encourage the students to learn another language (English), but the education has enhanced the literacy rates in Oman. In 1970, only boys went to school and majority of women were illiterate. Though this was once the case in Oman, the education system has given males and females the education they need and rightfully deserve. As shown in table 2 below, literacy rates have increased and will continue to increase as education becomes even better in the future.

Table 2

Literacy Rates In Oman

(Mary-Jane Deeb, 2005)

| | |
|------------|-------------------|
| Population | 2,600,000 |
| Females | 65.4% (1985: 16%) |
| Males | 82% |

Since 1970, 28 colleges have been constructed throughout Oman. (Top Universities in Oman, 2014). Most significantly Sultan Qaboos University, which is considered to be the top school in all of Oman, and is located in the city of Muscat. Along with the new colleges being constructed to allow Omanis to have a better education, women’s opportunities have increased along with the construction of the schools. Women are becoming a part of Sultan Qaboos leadership council and for the first time in Omani history, while women under Sultan Qaboos now hold a significantly powerful position.

Table 3

Male and Female Students in Oman

(Rassekh S., 2004)

| Year | Number of Schools | Number of Students | Number of Girls | Proportion of Girls (%) |
|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Before 1970 | N/A | N/A | 0 | 0 |
| 1980/1981 | 373 | 106,032 | 35,190 | 33% |
| 1995/1996 | 953 | 488,797 | 236,331 | 48% |
| 2001 | 993 | 554,845 | 270,344 | 49% |
| 2003 | 1,022 | 576,472 | 279,180 | 48% |

Jobs:

Are women being allocated more job opportunities? Very few women have held significant jobs outside of their homes. Since 1970, there has been a push for more women to participate in the work force in Oman, which has been led by Sultan Qaboos himself. “The number of representatives for each are in the 1994 OCC (an area consists of several Wilayats) was as follows: 11 members represented the Muscat area, which compromises six Wilayats (two of the 11 members were women)” (Alhaj, 2000). Women are increasingly becoming more visible in Sultan Qaboos’s counsel and under governmental ministries.

Table 4

Women Working in Oman (Percentage)

(Khaduri, 2007) and (Al-Farsi, 2014)

| | |
|------|-------|
| 1993 | 9% |
| 2000 | 17% |
| 2006 | 16% |
| 2014 | 26.8% |

The women’s influence allows a difference of opinion within the Sultan’s leadership council and shows that he does not distinguish between genders, but coincides with only the contributions you can make for your country. By integrating women into the government spectrum, Sultan Qaboos wants to put women into the public eye and transform the already modernizing ideals. “From the early 1990s, the government has made great efforts to include women in the government. Women were nominated to run for election to the consultative council in 1997, with two obtaining seats, and several speeches of the sultan emphasized the importance of integrating women into public life” (Calvin, 2014). Women have seen an increase in reinforcing encouragement for them to have jobs in Oman.

Table 5

Women’s Freedom in Oman

Scale of 1 to 5: 1 represents the lowest and 5 the highest level. (Mary-Jane Deeb, 2005)

| | |
|---|-----|
| Non-discrimination and Access to Justice | 2.0 |
| Autonomy, Security, and Freedom of Person | 2.1 |
| Economic Rights and Equal Opportunity | 2.7 |
| Social and Cultural Rights | 2.1 |

Sultan Qaboos has taken steps to incorporate women into governmental roles and emphasize the policy of nondiscrimination with the hiring of women in the public and private sectors. Prior to the modernization in 1970, women were excluded from any participation in local or national government positions within Oman. Currently the contribution of women has improved tremendously according to Table 5. Keep in mind, women weren’t even allowed to be educated before 1970. Relatively, women’s rights, freedom, and opportunities are better, which is a major improvement for Oman. Sultan Qaboos has invigorated Oman to create better work selections for women and for them to exercise their free will more in among the country.

Outside of the government, there still are more women working than prior to the change of leaders. “As of 2000, there were 123,000 employed women, which translates to 17% of the female population” (Rassekh S., 2004). You can consider this a major achievement if you look at

women not working at all in the 30 years prior. Along with the success of women becoming more employed, women are contributing to the newly developing education system that is growing throughout Oman. Women have become dominant in this field and have maintained jobs as teachers in majority of Oman. I observed first hand that other fields have become dominated by women, which will be discussed later on in the paper.

Table 6
 Women Working as Teacher's
 (Rassekh S., 2004)

| Type of School | Male | Female | Female/Male |
|----------------|--------|--------|-------------|
| Basic | 3,190 | 7,950 | 2.49 |
| Primary | 4,192 | 2,847 | 0.68 |
| Preparatory | 3,139 | 2,835 | 0.90 |
| Secondary | 2,951 | 3,279 | 1.11 |
| Total | 13,472 | 16,911 | 1.26 |

Workshops and Skills:

“The Environment Society of Oman (ESO) has contributed by implementing women into local environmental issues. In 2012 the ESO initiated a contest in which only women could partake. The US Department of Interior (DOI) and Omani Women’s Association (OWA) funded the contest” (ESO Annual Report {a}, 2012). The aim of the project was to provide women the chance to voice environmental concerns distressing their local communities. The participants were to share their modification philosophies with decision-makers. “The project aimed to equip women with the necessary communication skills to advocate for environmental issues among their communities and with the higher authorities” (ESO Annual Report {b}, 2012). The ESO project included a total of 60 women that took part in the contest and 4 were chosen as winners.

The 60 women that expressed local issues for the project were trained in workshops in each region by the ESO. The skills they were taught included: acquiring data, background checks, and writing a research paper on an existing problem in their region. Not only do we see a regional and national outreach from Oman to educate women and involve them more into societal issues, they are encouraged to become more involved within their community. This program not only allows a voice to be heard, but the environmental issues within Oman are

brought to attention for the government to see. Along with these programs that are being offered, women are increasingly being presented with workshops or a chance to become educated and receive skills for the workplace.

Women's workshops are increasingly becoming more present and established corporations are introducing new workshops for women all across Oman. This not only helps the women as a whole by giving them assistance that can be used for jobs, but it encourages women to make a decision to diversify their skillset. The following is from AMIDEAST, a program originating in Washington D.C. This organization has had a major output of workshops and skills groups to help not Omani women, but women from all across the world. The following is an example from their website:

“Women account for nearly half of Oman’s population, but make up about one percent of its top leadership. The Community Capacity-Building Initiative for Women (CCIW) helped over 150 Omani women from across the country acquire communications and strategic thinking skills to strengthen their self confidence and empower them to contribute in all areas. Implemented in coordination with Oman’s Ministry of Social Development, the CCIW provided training sessions in five regions — Nizwa, Salalah, Sur, Muscat, and Sohar — to a representative group of women from the private and public sectors: members of Omani Women’s Associations, entrepreneurs, candidates for the 2011 Majlis al Shura elections, teachers and school principals, health sector employees, volunteers, and assorted other “leaders-to-be” in their communities” (Amideast, 2014).

The new skills that women are able to obtain will allow them to contribute to the Omani society and possibly hold a high position of employment one day. Even though this is not the only organization that does this kind of work, it is a recognizable organization that is well known for its outreach in the Middle East.

The text fails to explain how AMIDEAST chose the women or if 150 is the maximum number, but it does show an interest in women being increasingly enthusiastic about job opportunities. The report also does not explain if any of these women are allowed to attend the workshop by their husbands, if they attend without approval, or if all the women were all married. These statistics are unknown. The overall picture to be seen is that women are

increasingly becoming more encouraged to receive skills or attend these corporations' workshops to help them develop skills.

Interviews

Why I chose these Interviewees

The interviews I conducted have come from CIL (The Center for International Learning). Prior to arranging these interviews, I struggled to find women willing contribute to my research. Due to the conservative values of the country and the sensitivity of the topic, it was difficult to find people willing to partake in being interviewed for the research. Despite only interviewing from one work place, the program has a diversity of teachers, students, and faculty within their institution.

Interview #1

This was a group interview that I conducted at the Center for International Learning and they both wished to keep their identities hidden. I will address them as A and B. These women also gave their ideas of how to increase females working in Oman. Interviewee A explained she had a technical degree from a university, while B did not explain her education to me. Also, they both have lived in Muscat for an extended amount of time and only their fathers worked while growing up. Though together they agreed Oman it is still traditional, both acknowledged that it has drastically changed, pointing out that women were not working 20-30 years ago. The two interviewees emphasized that females do not have to work in Oman, and females work because of the following two reasons: life expenses are unaffordable, and the man cannot provide everything just by himself. In addition to this information, they settled on the idea that working depends on a family's wealth. Families that are not as wealthy are forced to have both parents working while wealthy families live off a single income. If a woman comes from a wealthy background or visa versa with the male, then raising the children would suffice in general.

I asked them what solution they would recommend for the children since the mother was not home all day; the agreed solution was more available daycares within Oman. Interviewee A emphasized the unavailability of daycares in workplaces or within a reasonable drive from their house in Oman. From this point in the conversation, A and B established that the government

should distribute an allowance for working women so they could pay for the daycares or nannies. In return, the nannies could be Omani women looking for a job. According to this interview, women are underpaid and struggling to afford a daycare or nanny while they work.

Interview #2

My second interviewee was born in Daressalaan, Tanzania, but has moved around due to education and her father's work. She has been educated in the United Kingdom. Professor Maryam is a teacher at the Center for International Learning, and is also my History professor. During our conversation she made an interesting statement, she broke down what she considered traditional and not in the household. While making a major emphasis on dress and being respectful, education was an idea she considered a necessity and encouraged women to work. Growing up, she had witnessed not only her father working, but her mother as well. Her mother worked because of finances and to contribute to the family.

Additionally, Maryam highlighted that women have the choice to work, whether it is needed or not, and they must find that balance when they are employed. She thinks that women are more independent when they work, and therefore feel more comfortable financially. I also found a common trend with both of these interviews, while Professor Maryam disagreed with the government providing money for nannies, she did agree that there is a lack of daycares. This would be an area of improvement for the government to consider going ahead in the future with women working.

Counter Argument

Why are women's roles changing in the household? I have found many factors that must be considered as to why women should or should not work. Even though I think the roles of women are changing and will continue to change in the future, considerations must be made. If a family is wealthy and it doesn't require a woman to work, then this is reason enough for a woman to not work. Overall, workingwomen are still considered the minority in Oman.

Additionally, we must reflect on what constitutes the interior work environment when it comes to the make-up of employees. Oman is still a conservative country that is a patriarchal society. Women may feel uncomfortable being in the workplace with a man or in the same room

as a male colleague. This concept also applies to female students in the universities. Not all females are from Muscat and interacting outside of their family (Mahrem) is not common. Therefore, when arriving to the university, it could cause culture shock for women upon arrival because of the high male to female student ratio and in return, may make women feel uncomfortable.

Why is it changing?

Findings and Opinion:

My interviews confirmed some theories I once had along with introducing new ideas that could be a great suggestion for the future. I found similarities in the interviews pertaining to a major setback for women: daycares. In order for women to be employed, this is a major necessity. For a Westerner, this may be an idea that is never considered since the daycare is easily accessible in a lot of workplaces or privately owned. This could be something the government or even the Omani people should look into when moving forward with more female employment.

Additionally, all three women interviewees agreed females are becoming more independent. As we see the employment rates increasing, education becoming more available, and the work force becoming less male-dominated, the breadwinner in the household could shift. Males will still be the main source of income, but women can now sustain themselves if necessary. If divorce were to occur, the woman could then survive by her own, unlike in the past, instead of having to return to her father's house until she is remarried.

In the past Oman has seen a major increase in education, wealth, and Western influence that has all contributed to the change in women's roles in present-day Oman. Omani women are supplied with the tools and education they need to be able to obtain a job when they graduate from secondary school or university. In my opinion, these are the reasons by which the traditions are changing within the household. We must also consider factors such as inflation, divorce rates, and the fact that a family cannot survive off of a single income. Because of the aforementioned reasons, and despite the hurdles women have to overcome, Omani women will prevail in the future as a major part of the workforce and will become more employable.

Conclusion

Women are increasingly having a lively and more noticeable role in Omani society. They have received support and reassurance from the government, which has provided schools and a university education for both women and men. The government has announced that women should be given career opportunities, along with equal pay. In the capital of Oman, women are currently employed by the Sultan Qaboos administration, particularly in the executive sectors. Omani women and men are considered equal in the workplace. Women now compete heavily against their counterparts in many ways of life and a variety of areas including education, health, business, government, and more. The atmosphere is quickly changing so as to empower Omani women, and encourage them to earn their own income. Women have made speedy improvements in becoming educated, especially with post-secondary degrees. In order for women to contribute to the nation-building in Oman, being educated is a requirement. Women in the Middle East, especially Oman, have come to be seen as political and economic actors who fend for themselves and are major players in the future of their societies.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

Please note as follows: These questions may not go in order when I ask them. The questions will be asked based on how the conversation is being held and how the interviewee is responding to each question. If all questions are not covered during the conversation, they will be asked when the conversation topic has been finished at the end of each question.

- * Where were you born?
- * Where did you grow up?
- * Was your family growing up traditional in values? (Strict, Traditional, Laid Back, etc.)
- * Did you father only work or both parents work? If you mother worked, how long do you recall her working and when?
- * Did you attend a university or any organization meetings that would help better job opportunities for yourself?
- * Men: What is expected of women in a household? Should she work?
- * Women: What is the role of women in the household? Should a women work to help the family?
- * Do you think women are working more? If yes, do you fee since women are working more; the role in the household is changing?