Women in Higher Education
Saudy Initiatives & Achievements
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Women in Higher Education
Saudi Initiatives & Achievements

Ministry of Higher Education
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"When we talk about the comprehensive development that our country is witnessing, we cannot ignore the role of Saudi women and their participation in this development. The productive role of women...has been a definite result of the great investment that the country has dedicated to the field of education for all of its citizens, men and women. As a result, Saudi women have been able to earn the highest educational credentials, which has enabled them to work diligently in different fields. Saudi women have proven their ability to handle responsibilities with great success, whether through their principal duty as mothers, or as professionals. We look forward to women acquiring a major role in a way that will promote the interests of this nation on the basis of Shari'ah (Islamic law)."

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques
King Abdullah Ibn Abdul Aziz
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Summary

As part of the objectives of the Kingdom’s development plans, women in Saudi Arabia today are vigorously pursuing higher education and professional careers, and seeking to become active members of society, where their roles are defined in terms of what they can offer for their country’s economic, as well as social and cultural, development.

The Saudi Government has started instituting a series of initiatives for enhancing access to higher education for women including the establishment of Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University for women, which is designed to become the world’s largest centre of higher education for women worldwide.

Currently, more than 300 higher education colleges exist for women in the country alongside universities, and women represent more than 56.6% of the total number of Saudi university students and more than 20% of those benefiting from overseas scholarship program. The percentage is expected to increase in the coming years with the establishment of a number of new universities in major cities in the Kingdom.

Saudi women have dazzled international observers by becoming pioneers in a variety of fields, most prominently science and research, and by receiving international awards and earning patents.

These achievements have been reflected in international reports and statistics. The 2009 Global Education Digest of UNESCO showed that Saudi women come remarkably ahead of western women in terms of obtaining academic degrees. Also the 2009 global gender gap report ranked Saudi Arabia at 25th among countries in terms of the gap between the two sexes in university registration. The kingdom thus ranked ahead of a number of advanced countries such as the USA and Germany.
1- Status of Saudi women in higher education

Saudi Arabia has long recognized that the development of human resources is a key element in a nation’s march to progress. The educational institutions it has established have produced many young professionals, both male and female, who are filling positions in the work force in a wide range of fields. As part of the objectives of the Kingdom’s development plans, women in Saudi Arabia today are vigorously pursuing higher education and professional careers, and seeking to become active members of society where their roles are defined in terms of what they can offer for their country’s economic, as well as social and cultural development.

Percentage of Saudi Women In Higher Education

[Bar chart showing percentages of females in university students and scholarships]
2- Saudi initiatives for women education

The Saudi Government is improving the quality of girls' education and has started to implement a new reform policy as well as instituting a series of initiatives such as King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud Project for General Education Development (Tatwir). The project is a new measure launched to introduce changes to the education system to help students achieve knowledge and expertise. The project aims to train teachers in school management, educational supervision, curriculum development, computer science, training, and self-development skills, and to apply modern technology in the educational process.

The rise in female university enrollment will also be aided by King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), that opened in September 2009. KAUST has lured foreign academics and international students, which is the main reason behind the move to speed higher education reform and boost the country's technological transformation.

The Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University for women is designed to become one of the largest centers of higher education for Saudi women, offering them new educational opportunities to enter the labor market. It will include an academic area of 15 diverse subject colleges. It will also include a housing area for staff and students, with public facilities. It will have a capacity to accommodate 40,000 female students. The world's largest women-only university is being built in Saudi Arabia, with a campus that will cover 8 million square meters.

Due to open in 2010, the Princess Noura bint Abdulrahman University, on the outskirts of Riyadh, will have a library, conference centers, laboratories and a 700-bed hospital. There will be facilities for research into nanotechnology, biosciences and information technology.
One more example of the interest shown by the Saudi leadership in women advancement is King Abdullah’s consent to sponsor the conference due to be held on 19 and 20/10/2010 by Imam University in Riyadh on “Saudi Women: Current Situation and Future Expectations”. The conference aims to confirm women’s right to education, highlight women achievements in education in the last decades, identify strong and weak points in women public and tertiary education, set strategies to face challenges, predict the future of women education, propose development projects, utilize expertise in the field of women education, and stress the leading role played by the Kingdom in women education.

3- Saudi Leadership Support to Saudi Women Researchers

Out of its belief in motivating Saudi researches of both sexes in the field of innovation and excellence in medical research and advancements, King Abdullah granted King Abdulaziz first class order to Dr. Khawla Al-Kurai, chief cancer researcher at King Fahd Research Center affiliated to King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center. This came in recognition of her distinguished research works in medicine and her international awards in her field. She has joined the board of editors of *BMC Genomic*, one of the most renowned journals in genetics.

Also, Dr. Huwaida Al-Quthami, head of cardiac surgery at Prince Sultan Center for Heart Diseases at Riyadh Military Hospital, received King Faisal fourth-class order for her medical achievements as the first cardiac surgery consultant in the Middle East.
4- Saudi women shine as pioneering figures in science and research at the international level

Saudi women have attracted the attention of international observers by becoming pioneers in a variety of fields, most prominently science and research. In recent years, Saudi women have made achievements unmatched by many in the Arab world, including their male counterparts, who have started to witness the field of opportunity shrink as women prove to be respectable rivals in various fields.

Women such as Professors Samira Ibrahim Islam, Ghada al-Mutairi, Hayat Sindi, Howaida Obaid al-Qethamy and Soraya Al Turki are notable examples of Saudi women who have made significant achievements in academic and scientific research.

Professor Islam was nominated as a distinguished Scientist of the World for the Year 2000 at L’Oreal and UNESCO ‘For Women in Science Awards 2000’ in Paris. She made significant contributions in drug safety by defining the Saudi profile for drug metabolism. She has held several academic leadership posts in her own country as well as international diplomatic posts with the World Health Organization. Professor Islam has also been a key figure in building academic infrastructure, beginning in the 70s, to support women studying science in higher education in Saudi Arabia.

Professor Sindi made a grand accomplishment for Arab women and Saudi women by pioneering, in collaboration with others, a device with a team of researchers that made medical analysis tools more available, easier to produce. The size of the device does not exceed that of a fingertip. Sindi and her team won two international first prize awards for her innovative “Diagnostic-For-All” device.
As for Professor al-Mutairi, she heads a research center in California after winning the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Director’s Pioneer Award Program.

The three-million-dollar grant was given to 32 professors for winning the best scientific research that discovers an object that reflects rays and treats illnesses without the need for surgery.

Dr. Faten Al-Zamil, Associate Professor in medical biology, College of Medicine and Medical Sciences at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, introduced an invention that ranked sixth among 600 inventions in an international competition in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She also received a gold medal for her excellence in the field of anti-cancer nano–molecules in camel urine.

Also in academics, Dr. Al Turki, Professor of Anthropology at the American University in Cairo, shines as an exemplary Saudi academic who lectures at universities worldwide from Harvard to George Washington.

Dr. Intisar Al-Suhaibani, College of Science at King Saud University, received an international award from the Korean Organization for International trade and the silver medal from the International Fair for Women Inventors held in Seoul 2009. She has already received the gold medal in the same year from Geneva International Conference.
The Kingdom managed to strike a balance between opportunities provided for both sexes in education through an ambitious policy of reforms. This policy bore fruit in the 2009 gap indicator issued by the international economic forum in collaboration with Harvard and California universities where the Kingdom ranked 25 in terms of university enrollment. The Kingdom got 1.50, ahead of the USA (1.41), Japan (0.88), France (1.27), Germany (1.00), and Switzerland (0.93).

It is worth noting that the report on the gap between the two sexes is an annual report that measures parity between them. It emphasizes educational attainment, and the level of political and economic participation of the two sexes. It also addresses the countries ability to bridge this gap.
According to the 2009 Global Education Digest of UNESCO, in the Arab states including Saudi Arabia, numbers indicating gender parity are almost identical, yet with much higher rates of growth for women. The report says that if trends continue, women will soon take the lead in that region.

The report predicts that, if the trend continues, the number of female students and graduates will be greater than that of their male counterparts at the world level.

The number of female students in tertiary education in the kingdom rose six-fold between 1970 and 2007 compared with a quadrupling of male enrolments during the same period.

Saudi tertiary enrolment ratios of men and women reached parity around the year 2003. Since then, the average global participation of females has been exceeding that of males. In 1970, the male-to-female enrolment ratio was 1:6. In 2007, it flipped, with the female-to-male ratio becoming 1:8.

In North America and Europe, a third more women than men are on campus. Latin America, the Caribbean, as well as Central Asia also show high rates of female enrolments. In a number of countries, at least two females graduate for every male. These countries include Bahrain, Barbados, Guyana, Latvia, Myanmar, Estonia, Uruguay, Qatar, Iceland, Panama, Lithuania and Hungary. On the other side of the coin, the countries where a third or less of tertiary graduates are female include Ethiopia, Cambodia, Mauritania, Guatemala, Mozambique, Andorra and Liechtenstein.

Men do outnumber women in the fields of engineering, manufacturing and construction in all countries for which data were available, with the opposite
proving true for the cohort of graduates in education, humanities and arts, social sciences, business and law, and health and welfare, where, in almost nine out of 10 countries, women outnumber men.

Another 2006 UNESCO report entitled «Women in Science: Under-represented and Under-measured» showed that women still have a long way to go to reach parity in employment in this area. It notes that women make up approximately 25% of the world's researchers.

The report said the under-representation of women in research activities could be traced back to education systems, particularly at the higher level. It suggested that other elements may also account for this under-representation. These include stereotyping, the difficulty of keeping a balance between work and household responsibilities, labor market conditions, the governance system and the role of researchers in society. The report called on decision-makers in higher education and on science and technology policy makers not to ignore the gender dimension issue.
Conclusion

Women higher education in the Kingdom is witnessing an unprecedented development quantitatively and qualitatively in terms of development programs, initiatives, and strategies. This development provides educational opportunities to women and plays an important role in realizing equity between the two sexes in job opportunities and overseas scholarships. The nomination of Mrs. Noura Al-Fayez as the first Saudi women to hold the position of vice-minister of education for women affairs, as well as