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A Quiet Revolution?

An irreversible transformation is taking place in the lives of many thousands of university-educated working women in the United Arab Emirates, Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Drawing on eight years' participative research and extensive secondary sources, Nick Forster introduces the first extensive study to describe this development in the Middle East. This book documents the emerging economic and political power of women in these countries, and how they are beginning to challenge ancient and deeply held beliefs about the 'correct' roles of men and women in these conservative Islamic societies, as well as in public- and private-sector organisations. It also describes the vital role that women could play in the economic development and diversification of these countries, and the broader MENA region, in the future. It is an essential read for professionals, scholars and students in fields as diverse as economic development, politics, gender studies, international management, human resource management and Middle Eastern studies.

NICK FORSTER is a writer, business consultant and facilitator based in New South Wales, Australia. Before leaving academia in 2014, he had worked in business faculties at universities in the United Kingdom, Australia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. He also worked at Al Faisal University in the KSA, where he was a professor of management, director of the MBA program and, occasionally, the acting dean. He has authored or co-authored five books, published more than 130 academic and professional articles, book chapters and conference papers and written numerous research and consulting reports for businesses in the United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. He is currently working on a new book, *Why Psychopaths Rule the World.*

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The Rise of Women Managers, Business Owners and Leaders in the Arabian Gulf States

NICK FORSTER

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Preface

This book describes a transformation that is taking place in the lives of tens of thousands of university-educated Arabic-Muslim women in three Arabian Gulf States.[1] These are a small but well-known country, the United Arab Emirates (UAE); one that few Western readers may be familiar with, Oman; and a large, wealthy but much-criticised country, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). It documents the growing economic power and civic influence of these women, the effects of this on ancient and deeply held Islamic religious and cultural beliefs, and how attitudes towards the 'correct' roles of women and men in society and in business and management roles are beginning to change and evolve in these countries in unexpected and surprising ways. It also describes the major contribution that women could make to the economic development and diversification of these countries and the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the future. However, this book is not a study of all women in the Middle East or the broader gender sociology and politics of the entire MENA region; it is a study of a relatively privileged but potentially very influential group of university-educated working women in three countries in this region. The implications of this study, however, are relevant to all Islamic countries in the MENA region, and these are described in Chapters 1, 8 and 9 and the Postscript.

In the UAE, for example, over a relatively short period of time (just two generations) the lives of many Emirati women have been transformed. They now enjoy economic, social and personal freedoms that their grandmothers could not have imagined, and life-choices that many of their peers in most other MENA countries can still only dream about. Although it is still very much a 'work in progress,' in

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some respects the UAE can be regarded as a model for women's economic and social empowerment in a Middle Eastern context. Even in the KSA – a country whose reputation for human rights abuses, judicial cruelty, religious conservatism, corruption and a repressive patriarchal culture is fully merited – there are many brave and resourceful women who are now openly challenging the hegemony of the ruling male elites in the political and legal domains and in public- and private-sector organisations. They have begun to question the oppressive control of the very powerful conservative male clerics and defy deeply ingrained cultural and religious assumptions about the 'correct' roles of women (and men) in this country. There is also, at least among younger, well-educated and more liberal Emiratis, Omanis and Saudis, a growing belief that the emancipation and economic empowerment of women is essential to ensure the long-term economic, political and social futures of their countries. However, as will become apparent in subsequent chapters, there is still a considerable gulf between the 'pro-women' rhetoric of some political rulers, business leaders and media commentators in these countries and what Emirati, Omani and Saudi women actually experience 'at the coal face' in the organisations they work for and as entrepreneurs and business owners.

Although I had an interest in the lives of women in the Middle East before I moved to Dubai in August 2007 and had read some books on the history and cultures of the MENA region, I soon realised that my views about the women and men I first encountered in the UAE in 2007 and in the KSA and Oman between 2011 and 2015 were, to say the least, simplistic and shaped by a largely Western-centric point of view. Over the next eight years, I encountered a very eclectic group of women and men, ranging in age from twenty-one to eighty-five years, who challenged several of the assumptions I had about the people who live, work and raise families in this part of the world. The women I met were very committed to the general development of their respective countries, but they also wanted to fully exploit the new opportunities they had to pursue the careers of their choice and,

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in some cases, to become leaders in business and politics in the future. They share these hopes and aspirations with many of their female contemporaries in other countries in the MENA region but, unlike previous generations of women in this region, they are uniquely positioned to take advantage of their growing wealth and financial independence.

Drawing on eight years research, this book provides an overview of the many new opportunities that are now available to women in the labour markets of the UAE, Oman and the KSA, but it also highlights the systemic inequalities that still hamper ambitious and talented women in public- and private-sector organisations in these countries.[2] The research presented in this book demonstrates that while women have made remarkable advances over the past two decades in many occupations and professions, particularly in the UAE, deeply ingrained cultural, attitudinal and structural barriers still prevail that will have to be dismantled before a true 'level playing field' is created for women in these countries and the broader MENA region. Having said this, the signs of real change in all three countries are already evident, and these are highlighted throughout this book.

This book adds to an extensive literature on trends and developments in international business and management but it is, to the best of my knowledge, the first one to explain why the growing economic power of women may be a significant catalyst for broader political and social change in the still largely male-dominated and patriarchal societies of these countries over the next ten to twenty years. While several non-governmental organisations, consulting companies and think tanks have examined the possible broader medium- to long-term effects of these significant economic, demographic and socio-cultural changes in the region, very few business and management scholars have addressed these. Furthermore, while many publications have described how organisations can create a more 'level playing field' for women, how this process can be managed in a conservative and patriarchal Arabic-Islamic context is only now being considered by some political and

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business and leaders in this part of the world. Hence, I hope this book may be of interest to anyone who is concerned about the lives of women in the Middle East and why their emancipation and empowerment may play an essential role in the economic and political development of the entire MENA region in the future.

A GUIDE TO THIS BOOK

Chapter 1 begins with a description of a period of time which has often been portrayed as the 'Golden Age' of Arabic civilisation, during the Abbasid Caliphate of the eighth to thirteenth centuries. This provides a stark contrast with the many economic, political, religious and social challenges facing every country in the contemporary MENA region, including the UAE, Oman and the KSA. Some of the material in this chapter makes for uncomfortable reading, but it would not be possible to write about the lives of women and men in these countries without referring to these important contextual issues. Indeed, as we will see in Chapter 8, it is the existential nature of the many challenges that do confront the Arabian Gulf States and the broader MENA region today that makes the economic empowerment and legal emancipation of women one of the most important national priorities for governments in the region. This chapter also explores the practical implications of this research for public-sector and business organisations in the Gulf States and describes its broader relevance for the medium- to long-term development of the economies of the MENA region.

Although the contents of Chapters 2, 4 and 6 vary to some extent, they all provide a brief history of the UAE, Oman and the KSA and also describe the immense impact of the discovery of oil and gas on their societies over the last four to five decades. These countries do have one major advantage when compared to much of the contemporary MENA region: they are relatively stable and still have revenues derived from oil and gas that can be used to build the diversified economies that can support their rapidly growing, young and increasingly restive populations in the future – but only if their

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political and business leaders choose to do this. These chapters also describe the unique challenges facing each country, the changing status and roles of women in these countries over the last twenty to thirty years, the emergence of the first wave of female business and political leaders and the cultural, attitudinal and structural barriers facing Emirati, Omani and Saudi women in the labour markets of their countries. Chapter 3 also features a section on the influence of Islamic theology on gender inequality and segregation in Muslim countries, and Chapters 4 and 6 contain sections on the influence of Ibadism (in Oman) and Wahhabism (in Saudi Arabia) on the lives of women. These chapters also contain evaluations by the World Economic Forum and the United Nations Committee of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of the progress that each of these countries has made towards legal and economic equality for women.

Chapters 3, 5 and 7 look at the opinions that Emiratis, Omanis and Saudis have about women in the workplace and their beliefs about the leadership abilities and competencies of women. We evaluate their opinions about the degree of equality that women enjoy in the national labour markets of these countries, describe the cultural and attitudinal barriers they encounter in organisations, summarise the very mixed opinions that men have about a woman's right to work and examine the emerging issues of work–life balance and work–life conflict. These chapters also contain case study sections which look at the experiences of women in two sectors of the labour markets of these countries: information technology (in the UAE), and entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized business owners (in Oman and the KSA). Chapter 5 also contains two contextual sections on the generic challenges facing female entrepreneurs in mature economies and in the MENA region.

Chapter 8 presents the *overwhelming* economic and business cases for creating greater opportunities for women in all professions and occupations in these Arabian Gulf States and the broader MENA region. It proposes that this transformation is one that must be

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endorsed and encouraged by the governments and business communities of every country in this part of the world. If it is not, almost all countries in this region will struggle to build the sustainable, diversified and internationally competitive economies that can support much larger populations in the future.

Chapter 9 presents a series of policy recommendations for improving the participation of women in public- and private-sector organisations in these countries and the broader MENA region, strategies for increasing their involvement in science, information technology and engineering professions and policies that may need to be enacted to help busy working women cope with work-family conflicts in the future. It also describes a range of national strategies that could be implemented to encourage more women to embrace careers in the private sector and to become entrepreneurs and small business owners.

The Postscript to the book reconsiders the regional economic, political, religious and social challenges first described in Chapter 1 and also describes how the changes and trends identified in Chapters 2 through 7 may affect the lives of millions of women in the Arabian Gulf States and the MENA region in the future. It concludes by asking whether what is being proposed in this book is in harmony with the teachings of Islam and whether the ruling elites and governments of the Gulf States and other countries in the MENA region are likely to embrace these changes and reforms over the next five to ten years.

It is, of course, common knowledge that all Islamic countries in this part of the world are characterised by conservative and patriarchal national cultures. They are also, as we will see in Chapter 1, collectively ranked in the bottom quartile of all international surveys of women's job opportunities, rates of labour force participation, health, education and legal equality. Women are still almost entirely absent from the official religious domain and largely absent from the official political domain but they do have a limited (but growing) role in the economic and civic domains.

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Nevertheless, as we will see in Chapters 1 and 8, all countries in this region face significant economic and demographic challenges; ones that will eventually compel them to improve job opportunities for women and greatly increase their participation in their national economies, particularly in the private sector. This, in turn, may lead to greater legal and social equality for women, as it has done in many Western countries over the last thirty to forty years. As noted earlier, the UAE has already realised this need, and Emirati women have made remarkable advances into the national workforce in recent years and now work in almost all professions and occupations. There are similarly encouraging signs in Oman and, surprisingly, even in the KSA. Both economic necessity and demographic trends will eventually compel even oil-rich Saudi Arabia to reform its current labour laws in order to create more job opportunities for the tens of thousands of young women who are now graduating from the country's universities every year and to help more of them become entrepreneurs and business owners in the future.

The greatest pressure for change in the Arabian Gulf States and the broader MENA region may well come from their business communities and business leaders, not from the political (or religious) leadership of countries in the region. This is because many business-people already know that even the oil- and gas-rich countries in the region will face significant economic, political and social problems in the future unless they can create resilient 'post-hydrocarbon' economies within one or, at most, two generations. As this book was being completed in June 2016, it was very evident that the precipitous fall in oil and gas prices between the end of 2014 and mid-2016 was already having a serious impact on the economies and national revenues of the UAE, Oman, the KSA and the other Gulf States. During 2015–2016, with the exception of Kuwait, all countries in the Arabian Gulf ran substantial budget deficits. As we will see in later chapters, this has created much greater pressures on the governments of these countries to accelerate the dual-process of labour market reforms and economic modernisation. The main purpose of this book

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is to show why this transition can only be accomplished with the active participation of a much greater number of women in the economies and political systems of these countries, and why regional governments will need to make the changes that will be required to achieve this as soon as possible. This transition, however, will be a very difficult one for the political and business leaders of the UAE, Oman, the KSA and every other country in the MENA region to manage, and the reasons for this are described in Chapter 1.

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Acknowledgements

This book is the culmination of the time I spent working in the business faculties of three universities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) from September 2007 to June 2015, and many people have contributed to the themes, ideas and policy recommendations it contains. I'd like to thank Khadija Alarkoubi, Lynda Moore and Carole Spiers for their helpful suggestions about the initial book proposal, Khadija for reviewing some chapters before the book was published and Daniel Lund, a colleague and friend at Al Faisal University, for listening to my half-baked ideas for this book during 2013–2014. I'd particularly like to thank the nine women who attended Master of Business Administration courses in the UAE and the KSA during 2008–2014, who reviewed several chapters of the book during the first half of 2016. It is a sad indictment of the constraints on freedom of expression in these countries that they all requested that I should not mention them by name in this book, as did three former academic colleagues who still work in the Gulf States.

This book would not have been possible without the help and assistance of several postgraduate and undergraduate students in these countries. They helped me gain access to many local public- and private-sector organisations to conduct questionnaire surveys, and also provided helpful personal introductions to female Omani and Saudi business owners. Many women and men in these countries also gave generously of their time for interviews and, in the process, taught me a great deal about their lives, their cultural and religious beliefs and their hopes for the future of their countries. I'd also like to say a special thank you to the group of female undergraduates at Zayed University who first enlightened me about the intricacies of

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their lives in the UAE during 2008 and also helped me understand why they, and their peers in Oman and the KSA, may play a major role in transforming the lives of women in their countries, the Arabian Gulf States and the broader MENA region in the future. Three of the award-winning final-year Capstone Projects written by some of these young Emiratis are included in the bibliography of this book. This book is dedicated to all of you and your hopes for a secure and prosperous future for yourselves, your families, your children and your countries. Last, but not least, I'd like to thank Paula Parish, Valerie Appelby, Daniel Brown, James Gregory, Stephen Acerra, Isawariya Lakshmi, Fred Goykhman, Yassar Arafat, Divya Arjunan and the marketing team at Cambridge University Press for their invaluable help and advice during the writing, editing and publication of this book.

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