

Managing under the abaya

The challenge of teaching leadership to women in an androcracy

TEACHING management skills to Saudi women might seem rather futile. Few women in the kingdom hold positions of power, and there are few industries in which they are allowed to pursue careers. But a leadership-development programme for Saudi women, initiated by the British Council and run by academics from Durham University business school, nevertheless hopes to make a difference.

The programme, in Riyadh, has proved popular. It aims to build women's confidence in business situations and to help them form networks, so that they can exert more influence as a group. The skills they need are not straightforward. It is very rare for a Saudi woman to be a man's boss, and women in leadership positions usually have a male sponsor. So women cannot make and implement decisions themselves, says Julie Hodges, one of the Durham teachers. They must learn to influence men without seeming to direct them.

There are also practical difficulties running such a programme. One of the courses was sponsored by the Saudi chamber of commerce. It is keen on promoting women. Yet when two female teachers visited its offices to discuss details, the rules of segregation meant that all the men had to leave the building. The tutors have yet to meet any Saudi men of influence.

Some leadership techniques are difficult to impart. The women wear an abaya, a full-length cloak. Some also use the niqab, a veil that covers the face. This makes it more difficult to show assertive body language. The tutors teach such things as voice control to compensate.

Dania Almaeena, a project manager at a Saudi charity and one of the participants, says the most important thing she gained was the confidence to ask for what she wanted. "If you keep your hands up and sit at the table to make your voice heard," she says, "eventually things will change for the better." She says she was also encouraged to persuade her husband to take on more chores at home, so that she had time to focus on her career. Quite a success, then.

The lot of working women is improving, if at a snail's pace. In 2009, the kingdom appointed its highest-ranking woman, a deputy minister for education (although her remit covers only female institutions). And the number of industries open to women managers is slowly increasing. Amid much comment, Squire Sanders, an American law firm, hired the first female Saudi lawyer earlier this year. Nonetheless, it had to build her a separate office, to ensure that she could not mix with her male colleagues.

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