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Women leaders in the Gulf: The view from Saudi Aramco

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The oil giant's most senior female executive recounts her experiences as a young leader at Saudi Aramco and describes its approach to developing talented women.

When I was a young woman growing up in Saudi Arabia, my family played a key role in helping me to get a university education and a job with Saudi Aramco. It was my mother who saw the local newspaper advertisement announcing that the company wanted to hire both males *and* females. This was very rare at the time and reflects Saudi Aramco's early commitment to women in business. When I joined the company, I was pleasantly surprised because it was hiring more and more women. At the time, however, they were still support personnel. Everybody accepted that—even us, "the girls." I was happy to have a job and eager to learn more every day.

Eventually, after getting an MBA in the United States, I found myself in charge of men as well as women, both locals and expats. This was still unusual and of course came with challenges. For example, in the early 1990s, when I was Aramco's supervisor of housing policy, a Saudi male asked to transfer out of my unit. He told my supervisor that if his family knew that his boss was a woman, it would ridicule his masculinity, and maybe he would be asked to divorce his wife. When my supervisor told me this, I said, "Absolutely, let the guy move out. I don't want to be responsible for a divorce."

In addition, at one point I supervised an expat American woman. She said that, number one, she would not work for another woman and,

number two, she would not work for a *local* woman; she thought the expatriates had come here to teach us, not to be managed by us. I told her I wouldn't force anybody to work for me but asked her to stay in my unit for three more months. She did and then withdrew her request to transfer out.

Over time, women became increasingly accepted in the workplace—and in leadership positions, too. Today we have more talented, capable, and ambitious educated women than ever. There are a lot of role models around the country, the region, and the world, and many people understand that women can handle a job as well as men. However, in Saudi Arabia, women, especially if they are married and have children, face a problem managing their personal and work lives. Here we still believe that raising children and running a household is a woman's job. The man does not share these responsibilities. That puts pressure on many women.

Developing the next generation

Saudi Aramco has long been a regional leader in hiring women. We hired our first in 1964. The environment was welcoming and supportive. But societal factors and limited educational opportunities meant that we did not attract or retain many women. Often, they were viewed as "short-timers."

Given our strategic goal to become the world's leading integrated energy and chemical company by 2020, we realized that we had to have the right talent. There is a huge shortage of qualified, skilled professionals in our industry. Yet we have a huge pool of untapped talent—women.

The number of women in Saudi Aramco had risen, but not quickly enough to meet our goals, so in 2010 we set up two initiatives to expand women's participation. One program, Women in Business, targets younger people starting their careers. The second, Women in Leadership, is for senior employees. In the former, we teach basic soft skills to build character, self-confidence, resilience, tolerance, flexibility, assertiveness, and awareness—how to succeed in a male-dominated business. Some of these women have never worked with men or interacted with them outside their families and don't know how to do so. When such women come to a more open, diverse company, some stumble and feel awkward. Very often, you are the

only woman in a room full of men. You find it difficult to speak up or do a presentation. And young women can be invisible: they do their work and share it with others, but if they don't speak up, their contribution may not be noticed.

So the Women in Business program aims to raise awareness and train women to speak up, to become visible. We want them to contribute in ways that everyone can see, to ask the boss for meetings where they can give their feedback and opinions, to document their contributions, and to manage their own careers. Women leaders in Aramco come to the program to discuss their experiences with participants and describe awkward situations they dealt with successfully. On the last day, we have a panel discussion. Several male and female leaders talk about these issues and answer questions about moving forward at work. Some 700 women have gone through the program.

After it ends, the participants custom-build a network of women in the company and select mentors. Women usually choose women, but they don't have to. I am grateful to my own mentors, who have all been men because no women were top leaders in the company. A male mentor focuses on career advice and how to network with other male leaders. He knows them better than I do because they meet in the same social circles, so he is more familiar with their personalities, mind-sets, and management styles. A female mentor may focus more on women's issues—how to deal with not feeling accepted, for example. The focus is mainly on how to act, behave, present yourself.

The other program, Women in Leadership—now in its third year—is for more senior women, both Saudis and expats. The junior women have many peers in the younger generation. They have their community, bonded through Twitter and Facebook. Not so for the senior people, who joined Aramco when it had fewer women and learned to meet the expectations of the company and society. Now they work to develop a leadership style that is both true to themselves and effective within a specific organizational context.

Women in Leadership combines self-awareness diagnostics, guided discussions, lectures, and interactive exercises. The program includes two forums. The first shows participants how to lead themselves by discovering their own leadership style and approach: where do you get your energy, who is in your network, what were

formative moments in your career, which strengths did you use to overcome obstacles. At the end of this two-and-a-half-day forum, the women write a letter to *themselves* about what they hope to explore in the gap between the two forums. Six weeks later, they open the letter and assess how they used that time. The second forum focuses on how to lead *others*—for example, negotiating with vendors or leading a team. About 60 women have gone through the program.

We are also expanding outreach programs in which we invite Saudi women still at school or university to hear inspirational speeches and build soft skills in areas such as communications. We offer scholarships to young women to pursue STEM studies at universities around the world, as well. This year, we have created a unit that manages all our women-in-the-workforce activities.

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The company is making progress. A few years ago, we had only three or four women leaders. Today, the number is 84. Increasing the representation of women in technical fields is the biggest challenge, but we believe we will solve it in time. Meanwhile, our programs have been an inspiration for the rest of the Kingdom. We have been approached by companies, government agencies, and educational institutions to help them launch similar efforts. And after seeing the programs' benefits, our male employees are saying that the company should address *their* specific needs, too, and strengthen their leadership skills. We are improving the environment for everyone.

People in Saudi Arabia are realizing that creating opportunities for women won't affect our Islamic values. It won't demean us, nor will we fundamentally change our traditional ways. There is also the economic dimension. Everybody wants to maintain a high standard of living, and many families can't do that with one salary. Two incomes will help families to send their kids to good schools, get good medical care, maintain a good lifestyle, and prosper and grow. Ultimately, a successful woman is a happy woman, and that will be reflected in the way she cares for her children, her husband, her family, and herself. ○

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