Arab Flair for International Women’s Day

Arab women are educated, determined and have increasing government support. What’s standing in their way? A report from the INSEAD seminar in Abu Dhabi.

A group of Yemeni school girls tired of studying in the dark, are part of a new generation of independent-thinking Middle Eastern women.

Determined to get the education they need, and assisted by a government entrepreneurship programme, the girls invented and manufactured solar-powered appliances, established the ‘Creative Generation Company’ and marketed their goods on YouTube.

The enterprise won “2012 Best Company of the Year” at a young Arab entrepreneurial competition organised by the non-profit organisation, INJAZ al-Arab, beating teams of high school and university students from across the Middle East.

“This is just a snippet of the average school girl and what she’s up to out there today,” INJAZ al-Arab CEO, Soraya Salti told an International Women’s Day seminar at INSEAD’s Abu Dhabi campus where more than 90 of the city’s business women - a mix of corporate and self-employed - came to commemorate women’s achievements under the theme ‘Inspire, Impact, Empower’.

Picking up new-found freedoms and, inspired by a need to prove themselves, Middle Eastern women are redefining their place in society, working alongside, and often overtaking, men in business, innovation and education.

But it’s not all easy sailing. Like their counterparts in the West, Arab women still face many social and financial challenges. They are under-represented in boardrooms, and often left out of the loop when it comes to major business decisions.

Women Help Society Prosper

“Or course women’s participation will help society prosper,” says Sami Mahroum, director of INSEAD’s Innovation & Policy Initiative in Abu Dhabi. “But can women really become more prominent and influential without an evolution or change in the whole social structure?”

Business practices today, notes Mahroum, evolved from a time when women stayed at home and looked after the family. Much knowledge is shared and many business deals conducted, in a male dominated environment whether it’s in a majlis
“Arab men’s-only meeting room), a bar or on the golf course.

“In some countries business is more transparent and happens in working hours but in many countries, both in the Arab world and in the West, that doesn’t happen,” says Mahroum.

Today, business players are expected to socialise at night or travel. For women, who are usually the primary family care-giver, this creates a problem. And for Arab women, many of whom are responsible for the extended family and restricted from socialising with men, the challenge is even tougher.

“We’re in a position now where as women we’re really opening up and thinking and talking through some of these things,” Sadaffe Abid, co-founder and CEO of Buksh Foundation, a microfinance institution aimed at youth in the Middle East, told INSEAD Knowledge at the sides of the Women’s International Day seminar.

“What do we honour from our heritage - this part is important, it's empowering, it's who we are. But at the same time what are some of the new elements we need to bring on board so we can play a more active and empowered role within our families and our society?”

The challenges are not just societal. Women still have greater difficulty than men getting finance to pursue their entrepreneurial goals and many are plagued with self-doubt when it comes to what they can achieve, says Abid.

At round-table discussions during the seminar, attendees representing more than 20 countries agreed self-confidence is one of the most difficult challenges facing young women across the globe. Another is networking, or the lack of it.

While women may be great communicators, there’s a barrier when it comes to discussing careers. And when business decisions are made they may not be so eager to nominate a friend.

Sara Mohamed, CEO of Abu Dhabi-based Al Bashayer Investment Company which specialises in women’s finance, believes that instead of breaking into men’s networks women should concentrate on creating their own.

**Poor Networking**

“Unfortunately, as women we are very poor networkers and I believe this is our major weakness. Men are very good at it. They refer each other to open opportunities, share information and are able to close successful deals. As women, we need to work together, explore and exchange opportunities; source talented women; and seek successful ventures. It’s only by supporting each other to take on leadership roles that women lead can a future generation of strong successful women.”

Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, where women are forbidden to drive a car or travel abroad without a guardian’s consent, female students are showing that by supporting each other and taking a stand, women can influence change. After winning the national competition for the INJAZ al-Arab event, a group of students faced down a government unwilling to let a girls team travel to Doha for the regional finals.

“For four months they kept pushing saying, ‘We won, we go’, “ Salti told the INSEAD seminar. “The (Education) Minister’s office kept saying, ‘No, it’s the boys (second place-getters) who will go’ but the girls were determined they kept pushing and sure enough in the end they got to go!”