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WOMEN WORKING IN OMAN: INDIVIDUAL CHOICE AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Middle Eastern women have often been portrayed by Westerners as silent shadows or as helpless victims of suppressive customs and traditions who are unable to organize or form groups on their own and for themselves and are prevented from entering fully into the public sector of life. The past decade, however, has seen an explosion in research and publication that fully acknowledges women as people in their own right. Women in the Middle East have come to be seen as political and economic actors who fend for themselves and struggle and reflect on their lives and the future of their societies. Through their actions, the boundary that defines what is traditional cultural behavior and what is contemporary, foreign, or unacceptable is often blurred.¹ The patriarchal state, however, fails to recognize the transformative power of women's contemporary behavior, which pushes the definition of "accepted" or "traditional" behavior beyond that found in official documents and local and regional legislation, with their largely male audience.

WOMEN AS PART OF GROUPS

In the Middle East, more so than in other parts of the world, there exists a resistance and a hesitancy on the part of governments to allow women to come together in formal groups.² And although a narrow range of women's associations, unions, and cooperatives does exist, these are most often created and tightly organized by men for women.³ The "free" association of women is made notable by its glaring absence in most Middle Eastern countries. At present, some independent non-governmental women's groups do exist in Algeria, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and the West Bank. They are missing, however, in the basically conservative Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, as well as in the radical "socialist" states of Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Both the conservative and the socialist states seem to share a hostility to formal, independent women's groups. Such groups are considered threatening in conservative regimes because they challenge the state's rigid control of women. Among the radical socialist regimes, the reasoning is that independent women's groups are subversive because they challenge the general consensus about which national goals are appropriate for the mobilization of women.⁴

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Hence, a multi-layered obduracy and resistance is directed at women organized in groups in the Middle East, the parameters of which may vary in time and space.

Women in Oman

Oman has been reluctant to permit either men or women to organize themselves into groups. Those few non-governmental organizations that have received recognition in the past two decades have been mainly sports, cultural, and university-alumni clubs for men, and a few charitable organizations for the handicapped with male and female members. Only one exclusively female organization has been allowed to function, under the careful supervision of government. All other women's efforts to form groups have been perceived by the government as being outside the realm of the culturally appropriate, and these groups have been refused permission to organize. What women try to negotiate in groups is often more successfully reflected in the separate actions of individual women.

Until 1970, the Sultanate of Oman could justifiably be described as the "Tibet of Arabia,"⁵ so complete was its isolation from the rest of the world. Unlike that of many of the states of the Gulf, Oman's population was markedly heterogenous. It included an elite urban merchant class with pronounced cultural orientation and trade links with India and the coast of East Africa. Along the coast, subsistence fishing settlements prevailed, and in the valleys and mountains, terraced farming communities were common. A few towns of the interior of the country were the centers of local and regional trade and some religious learning. These communities mirrored Oman's large and successful colonial empire and incorporated Baluchi, Persian, and East African elements into the dominant culture. In the central desert of the country were a number of nomadic pastoral tribes with cultural and social links that were derived from the Arabian Peninsula.

Prior to 1970, communications and travel between villages and towns in Oman were tedious, taking days, if not weeks, to reach a destination. For the small wealthy merchant class, educating their young was extremely difficult. The three modern schools in the country took only one hundred boys, and these were personally selected by the sultan. Many merchant families consequently resorted to smuggling their young men out of the country to be educated in Bahrain, Bombay, Cairo, Kuwait, or Mombasa. Occasionally, whole families went into exile, raising a generation of Omanis in East African, British, and Indian contexts.

After the palace coup that brought Sultan Qabus bin Said to power in 1970, the state moved rapidly to make up for lost time. Whereas the previous ruler had been wary of "modernization" and progress, preferring to carry out only those development schemes he could actually pay for in cash, his son, Qabus, set about commissioning schools, clinics, and hospitals. Roads and other infrastructural developments were begun. Omanis living abroad were encouraged to return to the country, and many highly educated men and women came back from exile to work in the spirit of building up their nation after decades of stagnation. In much the same spirit that Peter Dodd, Sondra Hale, and Valentine Maghadam⁶ describe as common during revolution or nationalist struggle, women were mobilized and took part in many aspects of Oman's development. Women were actively engaged in the armed forces, in the police force,

in the civil service, in education, and in radio and television. By the early 1980s, the literacy rate had climbed to 20 percent—from a single-digit figure in 1970. A network of tarmacked roads had been completed, and Muscat was connected by modern road to Salalah, Oman's second capital, 1,000 kilometers to the south. The social and economic transformation of the nation, funded mainly by petroleum wealth, was staggering.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the number of returning Omanis and recently graduated male students had climbed to such a level that jobs were becoming hard to find. The urgency of nation-building was passing, and women in particular began to feel a tightening of control and the setting up of barriers that made their passage into the public sphere of life increasingly difficult. Women's presence in the police, armed forces, and other public-service posts, which had once been so extensive, dropped visibly. This transformation came to be translated into a government-sponsored revision and tightening of the boundaries that marked out culturally appropriate gender behavior in Omani society.

The Omani government's attitude toward the formation of women's groups in the 1970s and early 1980s reflects the same transformation from an open, gender-tolerant attitude to a conservative, culturally rigid definition of appropriate women's behavior. During the early period of modern state-building, the first organization for women—the Omani Women's Association—was founded by several wives of the leading merchant families and formally registered after a decree from the sultan to that effect in 1971. Its objectives were to support the less-well-off women in the country. However, by 1978, when the government had consolidated its infrastructural and bureaucratic network, this organization was taken over and became incorporated as part of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor. Essentially, its activities came to be controlled and monitored by the men who ran the ministry. In 1984, a Directorate General of Women and Child Affairs was set up, and a female member of the elite merchant class was appointed as director-general. A sub-unit for women's associations was created, and the founder of the former Omani Women's Association was put in charge of supervising the creation and ongoing administration of new branches of the association throughout the country. Here the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor determined that women could meet and learn basics of hygiene, cooking, and housekeeping as taught by the mainly Egyptian expatriate, contract social workers. In addition, nurseries and creches were set up to allow women to attend these courses, as well as adult literacy classes.

By the late 1980s, women were being encouraged to move into the field of caring for the handicapped and disabled. A number of these government-run women's associations opened centers for handicapped children and their mothers. These mainly took the form of day-care units, giving mothers brief respites from the continuous care of their disabled or handicapped children. Omani women from the elite merchant families, and those who had recently returned from exile, were encouraged to volunteer to help in the running of these centers.

The government continued to attract Omanis to return to the country from abroad. Many of these Omani citizens had spent decades outside of the country. Those whose exile had been in East Africa were locally referred to as Zanzibari Omanis. They, as well as Omanis who had spent years in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, returned

to Oman with ideas of culturally appropriate gender behavior that reflected the more open cultures of their exile environment. Hence, the Omani women who first appeared in the work force—in offices, in radio, in television, and in business—were generally from this Zanzibari or Omani expatriate community.

From the late 1980s into the 1990s, a transformation began to take place in what was regarded as appropriate cultural behavior. The earlier freedom, given to men and women alike, to explore areas of activity deemed in the interest of state-building began to give way to a systematic prohibition on women's participation in certain activities. By the mid-1990s, the Omani government essentially prohibited women from organizing in groups,⁷ excluded them from certain educational programs, and discouraged them from entering particular occupations deemed inappropriate for the female sex.

Prohibiting Women from Organizing in Groups

In 1981, I began a fourteen-year association with a small (3,000-strong) nomadic pastoral tribe on the southern edge of the Empty Quarter in the Sultanate of Oman. My role during those early years was to assist the government of Oman in extending social services to this remote community, without forcing its members to give up their traditional way of life. This tribe, the Harasis, survived in the extremely arid and hostile desert by raising herds of camel and goats for milk. They ranged over an area of nearly 40,000 square kilometers (an area about the size of Scotland). Extended family units of ten to twelve people moved with their herds over the desert, following the graze and browse that appeared after rare rain or heavy fog. A typical family kept between 100 and 200 head of goat and 20 to 25 camels. The smaller livestock was owned and managed by the women and older girls, while camels were nearly universally owned and managed by men and older boys.⁸ Under certain conditions, families had to split their herds, with the men and older boys going off with the camel herd for graze and water and the women and young children setting off with the goat herds in search of the browse that was most suitable for them. These split households could operate for weeks and sometimes months before meeting up again.

Even when households did not split for the sake of the herds, women regularly ran households for long periods during the absences of husbands, fathers, and brothers. It was not unusual for an adult male household member to be away for months at a time managing a particular herd of camel or, more recently, seeking employment in adjacent countries. Even when both husband and wife were present at the same time, the sexual division of labor was such that the complementarity of their roles, rather than any presumed subordination of women, was obvious. Women were regularly conferred with before meetings of tribal elders. When such meetings were held in their presence, older women often took an active part in discussions concerning tribal affairs. They made their own representation to minor government officials when necessary, and regularly represented the family in the absence of their menfolk. Very similar features of social order are described in some detail for the Jibali tribe of Dhofar, the southern neighbors of the Harasis,⁹ and suggested in Walter Dostal's 1967 work on the Mahra and other Southern Arabian tribes.¹⁰ Women and men in these societies displayed an independence of action and thought that was regularly described in the literature on nomadic pastoralists but not often so overtly obvious.¹¹

When I first began to work with this community, four-wheel-drive vehicles had only just appeared. In 1976, the first private, off-road vehicle was introduced by a tribesman who had returned from employment abroad. Within five years, 80 percent of households owned a vehicle. These, however, were associated with men. Often, camel holdings owned by men had to be sold to purchase cars, and thus they were considered men's property. Clearly, vehicles were to transform the life of the Harasis profoundly. For the purposes of this paper, I will briefly outline two aspects of the effect that vehicle transportation had upon the Harasis tribe—that is, its impact on the traditional subsistence economy, and the way in which it drew households into the national market economy.

The motor vehicle was spontaneously and universally accepted by the Harasis tribe because it was viewed as a tremendous aid to their traditional economy. Vehicles could move men and animals around the desert to watering holes (there were only six in 1981) and to new pastures in very short periods of time. Journeys of three weeks could be cut to nine or ten hours. But vehicles could not be run on camels' or goats' milk. Hence, in order to operate their vehicles, men had to find paid employment. The standard rate of pay for a well guard, driver, or watchman—the local jobs available to the Harasis—was about the same amount of money needed to pay for gasoline and spare parts to keep a vehicle running.¹²

Within five years, most households had one man working for a cash wage. But this income was nearly all tied up with the running and maintenance of vehicles. Most goods (for example, wheat, sugar, tea, coffee, dates, manufactured items, and other specialty products) from villages and towns—which all pastoral groups require to survive—were bought on a barter basis. Occasionally, luxury items did find their way into pastoral households, but in the main the Harasis lived a subsistence-based existence, with goat and camel milk at its foundation. Slowly, over a period of five or six years, other modern items began to appear at campsites: gas stoves, cooking elements, thermos flasks, infants' diapers, gold jewelry, watches, radios, and cassette recorders. Many of these items simplified and improved the quality of the lives of women. They began to encourage further purchases along the same lines. But these were limited by the amount of money a woman could realize from the sporadic sale of her young male kids in the desert foothills' market towns. Traditionally, the income from these young animals was sufficient to resupply the family with basic foodstuffs and a few luxury items until the next season. Gradually, however, it ceased to be enough, as more and more modern goods began to appear in the regional marketplaces that the Harasis families wished to buy.

In 1986, two women who had particular talent in twining and weaving the traditional camel straps that are used functionally and ornamentally for riding camels began to make key holders for their menfolk using the same handicraft techniques. (The key holders were designed to help the men locate their keys when they misplaced them or dropped them in soft sand.) The simple idea of attaching brightly colored, braided, and twined wool to a keyring became an instant success, as did other items made to decorate the new beasts of burden—the four-wheel-drive vehicles. Within a year, the keyrings were being sold locally to the occasional traveler and tourist from the only gas station along nearly 800 kilometers of tarmacked road at Haima. With the help of a British weaving expert, the Harasis women were encouraged to produce these

keyrings for sale in Muscat, 500 kilometers away. At first, no more than a half-dozen women were producing the keyrings. But sales soared, and by 1990 forty-two women were making keyrings for two shops in the capital area. The turnover was nearly 2,000 units a year. The women were excited and wanted this venture to become something more meaningful. Talk began to circulate that the government was going to open a center for them in Haimā, where they would be able to meet, rest, or just visit with one another—just as the men already had in the reception room of the local governor. I proposed to the women (and to some husbands) that this informal cooperative working group be incorporated into a non-government association. With formal recognition from the government, the group could make a request to an international agency for a grant to upgrade the whole operation into a viable business, allowing it to manage its own marketing and bookkeeping and to run a revolving fund. Income from this activity would substantially increase the spending power of the female producers, in many cases allowing them to purchase needed comestibles and, in a few cases, adding to the private wealth of the woman. This suggestion was greeted with enthusiasm by the community as a whole. Harasis men and women were taken with the idea of creating a viable, productive, and modern commercial activity in the desert.

The process of getting the group recognized by the Omani government as an association was set into motion. Harasis men supported wives, sisters, and daughters by taking them into the local governor's office for fingerprinting, and two husbands further cooperated by agreeing to sign on as officers of the association (a few of the men were literate, but none of the women were). The paperwork, the drafting of bylaws and a constitution, and the fingerprinting of all the members were completed, and the documentation was submitted to the Ministry of Social Affairs for approval shortly thereafter.

During the same period, I became aware that the United Nations Development Program was offering grants for just such types of community effort under its "Peoples' Participation Program." I submitted a grant proposal for \$40,000 for a period of one year to set this group of women up as a self-help cooperative. The underlying assumption for all concerned was that, once the project got off the ground, producing women would be able to earn in the region of about \$250 to \$300 a month—not a substantial sum, but certainly a great improvement over their present conditions. The grant was approved in a very short period of time, and all that was required was the government's rubber stamp on the documents recognizing these women as an Omani non-government association. One delay after another arose. I held talks with government legal advisers. I changed draft bylaws and altered the paperwork, as advised by government legal experts. Still nothing happened. Finally, after eighteen months of waiting and with the approval of a second grant request for \$80,000 from the U.S. Agency for International Development, I sought a definitive explanation for the delay. It was obvious that the government was not prepared to recognize this informal collective of women as a legal entity. Without that recognition, it could not receive the two grants made to it by international non-government organizations. The unofficial, but very reliable, explanation I received from a senior-level official—a female adviser in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor who was also a member of the elite merchant class—was that the government felt that these illiterate, nomadic pastoral women were like children. They needed to be supervised by the government, as a child is supervised by its father. They were simply not "modern" or "civilized" enough to accept the

responsibility of being a formal association. They were vulnerable to exploitation, and thus it was the government's duty to protect them. The ministry would look after them in its own way, and at the right time it would set up and run a craft-type, income-generating activity for them, but directed by men in government. From another equally reliable source, I learned that the amount of money that was being earmarked for this remote, marginal group of women was simply too tempting. Other units within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor wanted to divert these funds for their own local projects.

With no hope of receiving official recognition, I withdrew the grant requests. But bureaucracy is not easily shut off. The larger grant (for \$80,000) had already been allocated for this project and transferred to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It could not be returned. A way to use the money had to be found. A number of alternative ways to circumvent the formalization of NGO status were attempted, to no avail. A department within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor then tried to put forward its own proposal for taking over the funds, suggesting that it would incorporate the Harasis nomadic pastoralists into its own ongoing village community development work. This proposal was not found to be a feasible plan, and, five years later, the award intended for the Harasis women's income-generating cooperative remained unspent and in bureaucratic limbo.

For the Harasis involved in this effort, the denial of their application to form a non-government association was perplexing. The two literate Harasis men (the only two, at that time) shrugged off this setback as another inexplicable aspect of central government. They did not perceive any gender bias in the government's refusal to acknowledge the group effort. Rather, they suspected that too much money had been promised too quickly, and thus greed and envy were at work. For them there was no shame in the women's organizing themselves into an economic cooperative to improve the living conditions of their families. Nor was there any suggestion that such behavior was contrary to the precepts of Islam. On the contrary, such an activity pointed to the greater equality of men's and women's lives in the Jiddat al-Harasis. Such ideals were reflected in their concepts of Islam and in the well-regulated and complementary place of men and women in society. They were prepared to cooperate, to take on the bookkeeping and more formal aspects of the project that would bring the group into contact with urban Omani men who perhaps held narrower cultural perceptions of men's and women's place in society.

In Oman, as in most of the modern nation-states of the Middle East, women have been and continue to be manipulated to represent symbolically the cultural integrity of the dominant culture in the country. Women are perceived first and foremost as wives and mothers, and gender segregation is customary. To earn status, women must marry and reproduce. Their husbands control their ability to work and travel; husbands also hold unilateral rights to divorce. Children belong to the husband's family and may be lost to the mother upon divorce. Family honor and good reputation—or the reverse, shame—rests mainly on the public behavior of women, and thereby reinforces the high degree of sexual segregation in the society.¹³ Thus when women form groups, there appears to be little scope for interpretation. Women in formal groups are acceptable only when they conform to the cultural ideals established by the state, which places women in caring and nurturing roles and perpetuates the ideals of circumspect public behavior, modesty, family honor, and generosity. Therefore, in

many countries of the Middle East, women are permitted to form only groups that are charitable organizations concerned with the welfare of the needy, disabled, or handicapped. Any other forms of association—including self-help groups; income-generating cooperatives; and professional, skilled volunteer teams—are often prohibited by law. It would appear that when women organize themselves into groups whose activities are not approved by the government, they are perceived as a threat to the male-dominated power structure of the state.

WOMEN AS INDIVIDUALS

When women in the Middle East act as individuals, the stage upon which they perform takes a shape that is much more in keeping with the realities and aspirations of their lives. The individual woman, by careful manipulation of her gender relations, often succeeds in circumventing or casting aside the culturally accepted bonds that diminish her life. Educated women in Oman, and in the Middle East in general, are found in nearly all professional occupations. In Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, women are often found in positions such as teaching and nursing.¹⁴ In Oman, women work professionally as lawyers, doctors, dentists, engineers, economists, bankers, and university professors.

A superficial review of the first General Population Census of Oman (1993) reveals that the most important occupational category for women is in the professions, within which nearly one-third (31.2%) of all currently or previously employed Omani women are found.¹⁵ Of this group of women, 80 percent held or currently hold professional or managerial jobs in Muscat. All told, in the mid-1990s, 40 percent of economically active women, whether currently employed or not, were in professional job categories.¹⁶ The significant level of past or present employment in the professional category used by the Omani census confirms the picture sketched earlier. Educated Omani women, many of whom were educated abroad, were encouraged to work alongside their male compatriots in culturally acceptable occupations to help build a modern, Western-oriented society.¹⁷

Women, however, still represent a very small percentage (8.6%) of economically active Omanis. Following conventional international definitions, the economically active population excludes the following categories of the population: students, housewives, retired persons, income recipients, and those unable to work. In light of such a definition, it is not surprising that a significant proportion of Omani women are not registered as economically active (more than 90%).¹⁸ This suggests, however, that the important agricultural and animal-husbandry work of women in rural areas of the country has been seriously under-reported.¹⁹ In most of the interior of Oman, and in the Arabian Peninsula in general,²⁰ women engage in agricultural production, in managing small herds of goat and sheep, and in growing fodder crops as part of their household work. This vital activity is not recognized either by the Ministry of Agriculture or by the Omani Census Committee as anything more than being a housewife. The ludicrousness of such a definition of women's labor is made most apparent when women's pastoral production of goat and sheep herd in the desert region of the country is systematically ignored and all women in pastoral households are classified as "housewives" as opposed to economically active women.²¹

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, individual women found work in Oman in certain culturally acceptable occupations. In the 1970s, Omani women found work in

government and in the private sector in a wide range of professional and technical fields. Although science, engineering, accounting, medicine, and law were accepted as fields in which women could work, nursing was not; nor was unskilled "elementary" work, such as cleaning in private homes or in industry. This last category was filled primarily by imported male labor from the Indian Subcontinent. And despite the concerted effort by the Omani government in the early 1990s to reduce its dependence on imported skilled and unskilled labor, the majority of unskilled jobs in the country remained in the hands of non-Omani laborers.

Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, I taught at the Sultan Qabus University in al-Khud. The university had been opened in 1986 and consisted of a number of colleges: Agriculture, Education, Engineering, Islamic Studies, Medicine, and Science. It had been built nearly 30 miles from the capital in an isolated location that was not easily accessible by public transportation. Its large teaching hospital attracted many of the inhabitants of the villages in the outlying areas to use its services. In 1991, I began to notice individual Omani women walking by the side of the road from the hospital toward the main highway linking Muscat with the major towns of the interior, such as Bahla, Ibra, Ibri, and Nizwa. This three-mile stretch of road had little traffic except that going to the university or to the village of al-Khud itself. There was no public transportation, although a pickup truck would occasionally stop and give a lift to people standing or walking on the side of the road. Throughout Oman, it was quite common to see men walking or hitchhiking—for many, it was the only way to get from one town or village to another. However, women walking along the hot rock-and-gravel shoulder was an unusual sight. At first, I took these women to be outpatients leaving the teaching hospital and making their way back home. I stopped whenever I saw such women and offered them lifts to the main road. At first, I didn't ask any questions. They silently accepted my offer, climbing into the back of my car and politely indicating where they wanted to descend. Over the next two or three months, I realized that I was picking up the same seven or eight women. On occasions, I would see two or three of them together by the side of the road. Their numbers made them less shy, and in small groups they began to talk among themselves in the back of my car. Gradually, a camaraderie developed. I learned some details about their family life, and they asked some details of mine. However, because hospitals and clinics in Omani towns and villages are important gathering and visiting points for women, I continued to assume that my frequent Omani female passengers were outpatients at the university hospital or one of the specialist clinics.

One day, cutting across the campus, I came across one of my female passengers. She was standing in a covered passageway between buildings, cleaning a window. I stopped and greeted her and asked her what she was doing there. Without any hesitation, she told me that she worked as a cleaner, and she volunteered information about my other regular passengers. Some worked as orderlies in the hospital, others as cleaners in the dormitories or other university colleges. And a few worked in the hospital kitchens as "kitchen help."

This form of employment for women was very new to Oman. I had, for a number of years, occasionally come across female orderlies in the major hospitals of the country. They were nearly always elderly divorced or childless women, with no children to raise or with grown families. Such local jobs in the community hospitals and clinics served several purposes. They gave the women a new role in the community, even if

it was a low-status role, and allowed them to support themselves in the face of destitution. The women I was meeting outside the gates of the university, however, seemed to be different. One or two of them were recently divorced, but most of the women were married with husbands at home working on their date gardens. All of them were struggling to make ends meet to help their husbands and their children. All of them had only recently taken on this work. And nearly all of them were in their 30s, 40s, or 50s.

I began to inquire further to try to determine how widespread this new category of employment was at the university. One major subcontractor at the university employed twenty-four women as cleaners; another had none. There seemed to be no pattern. Further inquiry revealed that university contracts, in keeping with the general policy to "Omanize" that had come into full prominence in the 1990s, specified the number of staff who must be Omani and the training programs that were mandatory. These subcontractors often relied on the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor to provide them with their Omani quota. Although the expatriate management staff tried to encourage the hiring of women, the initial numbers of Omani women being presented for employment was very limited. By the mid-1990s, nearly all of the cleaning and catering subcontractors at the university were employing Omani women from local as well as more distant villages.²² And the number of illiterate women employed in this category of work looks set to grow.

Statistical data confirm the trend of illiterate women seeking employment in simple unskilled occupations. The 1993 census reveals that the single highest regional percentage of women engaged in elementary occupations is found in the Dakhiliya—the rural area that services the university hospital as well as the hospitals and clinics of Nizwa. Further, the data reveal that women classified as working within elementary occupations are older, with less than one-third (30%) in their 30s; more than one-third (36%) in their 40s, and one-fifth (19%) in their 50s. These data confirm the picture on the ground. Some illiterate, rural Omani women have begun to come forward and seek employment away from their homes, and often some distance from their villages. On the surface, it would appear that they are breaking away from the confines and culturally delimiting features that circumscribe their lives.

Isolated examples of illiterate women moving into poorly paid wage labor outside their immediate community are being reported in other Gulf states and in Saudi Arabia.²³ In all of these cases, it is employment sought out of necessity, with divorce, death, or destitution as part of the picture—a widow or a divorced woman trying to support her children, and occasionally a daughter helping to support her elderly or sick father. These are all examples of women pushing through the boundaries of culturally appropriate behavior to new frontiers either in the absence of men in the household or with their blessing.

GROUP EFFORT, INDIVIDUAL CHOICE, AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS

The past twenty-five years of Oman's history have been marked by tremendous change, rapid infrastructural development, and sizable growth in the national labor market. Educated Omani women have contributed to a significant part of that growth. This statistical fact has been looked upon by some as evidence that cultural constraints have not hindered Omani women in their quest for greater freedom and

self-expression. It may be the case that Omani women in senior managerial and professional positions are not perceived as threatening the cultural integrity of the dominant culture of the country in any way. As long as these women are wives and mothers first, and they make symbolic gestures regarding gender segregation in public workplaces, they are rewarded by tolerance, and even at times respect, for their professional performance. This phenomenon is true throughout the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East in general.²⁴

When the prospective or actual laborers are illiterate, primarily rural-based women, however, the reality is not so clearly constructed. Women from pastoral households are not included in official statistics on the economically active labor force of Oman. And in spite of their very active role in animal husbandry, which often provides their families with the income required for subsistence food purchases, these women are categorized in the first Omani General Population Census as "housewives," and hence are excluded from enumeration. The group efforts of such women to form an income-generating association or cooperative are regarded by the authorities as inappropriate for them and for the society at large. Such group activity is behavior that those in authority perceive as disturbing the cultural integrity of the dominant culture of the country, because it moves women into areas that, at least in urban centers, is not considered appropriate for women. Women, under the guidance of men, may work in special areas of employment approved by men, but they may not create their own sphere of activity or confuse the sexual division of labor by involving men in what should be a set of women's activities.

"Cultural acceptability," however, is not a statistic or fixed idea. What is deemed acceptable or in keeping with cultural traditions has been quite fluid and susceptible to interpretation by various power groups in Omani society. Traditions are constantly being invented and altered. The images of global culture carried by broadcasting networks such as the BBC, CNN, MBC, and MTV, which are being beamed to the Arabian Gulf by satellite, are affecting Omani ideas of appropriate cultural responses and behavior. Individual women may still manage to behave in culturally exceptional ways. But when the exceptions become noticeable, local power groups that feel threatened act to circumscribe that behavior. A case in point is the recent ban on female students' entering the College of Engineering at Sultan Qaboos University. When it first opened in 1986, the university was a new universe. As Oman had no tradition of higher education, university life and the behavior of its co-educational student body was being gradually created and explored. Students were admitted to the university solely on the basis of their high-school-examination results, regardless of gender. With each succeeding year, the number of female students in the colleges of medicine, science, and engineering crept upward.²⁵ In the early 1990s, however, certain groups within Omani society began to press for the exclusion of women from the College of Engineering. The argument made was that it was not culturally correct for women to work outdoors, in the "field." Thus, training women to become engineers was suddenly deemed inappropriate, and women were denied access to this college. The female students already enrolled protested this sudden ban, with limited success. Most women were forced to transfer to other colleges, such as the College of Education.²⁶

Sometimes cultural appropriateness must be created for new situations. In the case of Oman, the newness of the institution of higher education has meant the creation of

traditions, often reflecting global cultural values. When in the early 1990s the first graduating class of the College of Medicine was about to be presented to the sultan, the college faculty decided to institute an "outstanding student" award. The international medical faculty (representing Belgium, Canada, Egypt, India, Jordan, Sweden, Sudan, and the United Kingdom, among other nations) voted by secret ballot. When the outstanding student of the year was found to be a female student, the international faculty feared that Omanis would consider it inappropriate for a woman to take first place. They decide to vote again to extend the award to the top two students. When that still did not alter the gender balance, the award was extended to the third-place student, a man. All three students—two female, and one male—were presented to the sultan as the outstanding three students of the year during the open-air graduation ceremony held at the university's amphitheater. In a gesture that surprised many of the faculty, the third-place male student came forward to accept the award on behalf of all three students. Later, at a private college ceremony, the three top medical students were each appropriately given their first-, second-, and third-prize awards. In this setting, rumors circulated among the female students who were trying to make sense of the formal awards ceremony with the sultan. Some said that they had heard that the sultan never shook women's hands in public; others said that the Diwan, the office that organized the sultan's protocol, had insisted that only a man step forward to shake the hand of the sultan. Whatever the reason, and despite some obvious discomfort, a new tradition—but an old global stereotype—was initiated in Oman that makes men appear to be more intellectually deserving in public than women.

It is public, large-scale, women's activity that seems to have elicited negative local and national responses, restricting women to what is deemed culturally acceptable behavior. Nevertheless, the emergence of a new category of employment—in elementary occupations—by mainly illiterate rural women appears, at first, to be breaking new ground. In these situations, women are being permitted to leave their local community, and even villages, to travel unaccompanied to places of work with major Omani firms. They appear to be filling jobs that were held by expatriate male laborers, and they seem to be doing so with the support of their families and their grown children. It is as though the cultural constraints that kept women under the control of husbands and fathers, that required careful actual or symbolic gender segregation, are being relaxed. However, a different reading of the current situation would suggest that no relaxation is taking place. It is only an extension of the boundaries.

Repeated and reflected in the works of Soraya Altorki and Donald Cole, Sondra Hale, Evelyn Early, Mona Almunajjed, Hoda Hoodfar, and others are cases in which the frontiers of cultural acceptability are being pushed—often by economic, and occasionally by political, necessity. With the support or simply the acquiescence of kinsmen, women are gradually pushing against boundaries that are no longer viable. Thus, in Oman and elsewhere in the Middle East, jobs in elementary occupations in places such as the university and the national petroleum company are being regarded as safe for women to take on. The work itself is viewed as an extension of the work carried out in the home, and the relaxation over travel is, perhaps, no more than a nod in the direction of expediency. Rising unemployment among men, the high cost of living, and the need to support reasonably large families all contribute to a situation in which these women are being encouraged by their husbands, as well as by the community, to get and hold onto any jobs they can find, however far they are from

the household. It is perhaps a case of necessity being the mother of innovation. And as long as the number of women entering into this area of employment is not too great, notions of cultural integrity seem not to be relevant.

NOTES

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¹Judith Tucker, ed., *Arab Women: Old Boundaries New Frontiers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Hoda Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Evelyn Early, *Baladi Women of Cairo: Playing with an Egg and a Stone* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Reiner, 1993).

²For further discussion of women and groups in the Middle East, see Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo, ed., *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1997).

³See, for example, Bouthana Shaaban, *Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about Their Lives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988); and Haya al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender* (London: Saki Books, 1993).

⁴Mervat Hatem, "The Enduring Alliance of Nationalism and Patriarchy in Muslim Personal Status Laws: The Case of Modern Egypt," *Feminist Issues* (1986): 19–43.

⁵Dale Eickelman, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 368.

⁶Peter Dodd, "Family Honour and the Forces of Change in Arab Society," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (October 1973): 40–54; Sondra Hale, "Transforming Culture or Fostering Second-hand Consciousness? Women's Front Organization and Revolutionary Parties—The Sudan Case," in *Arab Women*, ed. Tucker; Valentine Moghadam, *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies* (London: Zed Books, 1994).

⁷By 1995, Oman had a few dozen non-government organizations, but the Omani Women's Association was the sole woman-only organization in the country.

⁸Dawn Chatty, *Women's Component in Pastoral Community Assistance and Development. Sultanate of Oman* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 1984).

⁹Jorg Jantzen, *Nomads in the Sultanate of Oman: Tradition and Development in Dhofar* (Boulder, Colo., and London: Westview Press, 1986), 148–41.

¹⁰As quoted in *ibid.*

¹¹Dawn Chatty, *Mobile Pastoralists: Development Planning and Social Change in Oman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and William Lancaster, *The Rwala Bedouin Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹²Chatty, *Women's Component*; *idem*, "Tradition and Change Among the Pastoral Harasis in Oman," in *Anthropology and Development in North Africa and the Middle East*, ed. Muneera Salem-Murdock, Michael Horowitz, and Monica Sella (Boulder, Colo.; San Francisco; and Oxford: Westview Press, 1990).

¹³Harasis men and women can be regarded as following the dominant cultural ideals concerning women, up to a point. Upon marriage, both Harasis men and women come to be regarded as full adult members of the community. For women, the ability to manage the herds of small livestock, to run their households in the absence of men, and to maintain the family's honor through good behavior and careful attendance to modesty in dress and full veiling in the absence of physical segregation are of paramount importance. Divorce is not unilateral; rather, it can be initiated by women, who then return to their natal families. In the harsh setting of the Jiddat al-Harasis, the contribution of women to the family and the community is highly regarded. Isolated adults simply cannot survive. Hence, polygamy is rare, and serial monogamy is the rule rather than the exception, with different partners in youth, middle age, and old age not uncommon.

¹⁴Soraya Altorki and Donald Cole, *Arabian Oasis City: The Transformation of Unayzah* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 187–93; Mona Almunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1997), 86–93.

¹⁵The Omani General Population Census classified economic activity according to standardized occupational categories recommended by the United Nations. The category "professional, technical worker" includes, among others, occupations such as physical scientists and related technicians; architects and

engineers; life scientists and related technicians; medical, dental, veterinary, and related workers; statisticians, mathematicians, systems analysts, and related workers; economists; accountants; jurists; and journalists (Government of Oman, *Statistical Year Book*, 23rd ed., Information and Documentation Center [Muscat: Ministry of Development, 1995]. Although this categorization may obscure certain culturally specific occupations in different contexts, it is useful for international comparisons of labor-force composition.

¹⁶UNICEF, *A Statistical Profile of Omani Women: Based on an Analysis of Data from the First General Population Census of Oman* (Muscat: UNICEF, 1996).

¹⁷A second cluster of Omani women is found to have worked, or to be currently working, as clerks (15%). And finally, one-tenth of Omani women have been or are currently engaged in elementary occupations (UNICEF, *Statistical Profile*). This group, significantly, is overwhelmingly from a rural background.

¹⁸The "specific" or "adjusted" economic-activity rates that relate economically active persons age fifteen and older to the total population age fifteen and older gives an adjusted economic-activity rate of 68 percent for Omani men and nearly 7 percent for Omani women (*ibid.*, 51).

¹⁹Such under-reporting is common throughout the Middle East. In Egypt, for example, national statistics for 1960 indicated that only 4 percent of the total agricultural force was female (see Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market*, 109). But a detailed rural survey found that 25 percent of non-domestic labor was performed by women.

²⁰See, for example, Altorki and Cole, *Arabian Oasis City*, 44–45.

²¹An example of this under-reporting or failure to capture a reality in numerical form can be found in the census data for the Al Wusta region of Oman. Al Wusta is the administrative unit for the central desert region of Oman. This is primarily an area of pastoral production of camel and goat. The census reports the highest rate of economic activity for men (81.8%) and the lowest for women (2.2%). These figures cannot possibly reflect the reality of women's work in this region (see Chatty, *Mobile Pastoralists*).

²²One well-established company that provides cleaners to various businesses and government in Oman reported that its unit responsible for the university, the university hospital, and the national petroleum company was employing twenty-four Omani women as cleaners in 1993. The number has grown steadily, and in 1997, this company was hiring thirty-eight women. These local contracts were for 100 Omani rials (including housing and transportation allowance). The terms of employment include training in health and safety, personal hygiene, cleaning procedures, mopping, stain removal, and the use of appropriate language with supervisors.

²³Almunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia*, 96–97.

²⁴Nadia Hijab, *WomanPower: The Arab Debate on Women at Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 130.

²⁵Because female high-school students in Oman tended to get better high-school-test results than their male agemates, they had first choice of the colleges they wished to enter. After some hesitation in the first year or two, they began increasingly to enroll in the most prestigious colleges—that is, medicine, science, and engineering.

²⁶One outstanding female student, with her father's backing, refused to be moved. She graduated at the top of her class and joined the national oil company as an engineer.