



# Women in the Gulf

An EGIC Investigative Series

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## Interview with Dahlia Rahaimy

*Business consultant and journalist from Saudi Arabia*

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC), while striving to develop a comprehensive outlook on the Arab Gulf region, is very interested in exploring the evolution of the political, economic and social lives, and roles, of women in the region. An expansive gender divide within many Arab Gulf states is evident and many root causes — mainly revolving around cultural and social traditions — have been identified in the voluptuous body of literature focused on gender studies. However, in the context of fundamental reforms unfolding in the Arab Gulf, it is also clear that ascribed roles of women ARE rapidly undergoing considerable alteration and women are increasingly seen as active citizens making major contributions to the political, economic and social wellbeing of their community and state. Significant differences do, of course, exist between each of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC). Some — re: Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain — have already undergone major reforms and have, for decades, had women appointed as Ministers of State and other representatives. Others — re: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait — there have long been more women than men in higher education and higher positions. Yet all the GCC states are scaling-up their efforts to create new spaces for their female citizens by confronting obstacles from within more conservative segments of society. The road is long but the GCC countries are definitively en route. This series of Women in the Gulf will keep track of such changes as they happen. Building on the direct testimonies of women from the Gulf countries, the EGIC is committed to publishing: interviews, analyses, commentaries, surveys and on-the-ground research about the ever-changing role of women in the GCC.

In this publication, we talk to **Dahlia Rahaimy, a business consultant and journalist from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, running the blog *Dahlia's News on Saudi Arabia***. She has a decade of experience in the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) as an advisor and, then, Country Director for Germany. She also has a long-standing experience in journalism, having worked for ten years as a journalist and editor at *Arab News* and publishing for several other outlets including *AlSharq* *AlAwsat*. Her upbringing and education has partly taken place in Saudi Arabia and Europe, between Germany and Ireland.

***EGIC: As a Saudi woman growing up in Europe, what do you think are the most common misunderstandings about Saudi women in Europe and European women in Saudi Arabia?***

The most common misunderstanding about Saudi women is that we are all victims, unable to make our own choices. Of course, there are many cases in which the guardianship system, social

structures and traditions lead to disadvantaged situations in which women are victimised. However, Saudi women have their own agency in the way they manage families, a key social unit in Saudi society, and find essential solutions in a complex environment. By contrast, the image of European women in Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab world nowadays is that family relations don't matter much in respect of parents, the elderly, etc. In the past, many Saudi men studying abroad married American or European women because they were less bound to traditions than Saudi women. Today the situation has changed as Saudi women are getting more chances to broaden their minds through education, work and travel, while keeping their Saudi culture.

***EGIC: What are the main challenges that you have encountered as a Saudi young woman living in Europe? And did you experience any challenge in going back as a professional to Saudi Arabia?***

My biggest, everlasting problem is that people anywhere in the world don't see nor believe that Islam and freedom can go together. The fact that I was simultaneously Muslim and open-minded and adjusted to the Western mentality wasn't easy for people to accept. I believe too many people are confined by clichés.

***EGIC: How would you describe your experience as a female Country Director of the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) for Germany?***

Working for SAGIA was a great experience, especially with the German side. It gave me the opportunity to connect the two worlds that I was raised in, both of which influenced and marked me. I felt I was on a mission to do something useful by erasing loads of prejudices that had been hindering smooth communications and interaction between the two cultures.

***EGIC: How rare is it to see a woman in a managerial position representing Saudi Arabia abroad? And was it surprising for Europeans to see a female Saudi representative?***

In my time at Arab News and SAGIA it was strange to see Saudi women in managerial positions in and out of Saudi Arabia. Today it has become normal and no longer unusual. In my case, most people were surprised to see a Saudi woman in such position speaking and thinking German. But it was definitely well received.

***EGIC: You have held positions of responsibilities for decades in different industries in Saudi Arabia. What was your experience with your male colleagues, superiors or subordinates? Do you think there are differences in different industries?***

I was lucky that I always had very supportive colleagues around me. At *Arab News*, most of my colleagues were from the Indian Subcontinent and very knowledgeable about journalism. Our company had several newspapers and magazines, in Arabic, English and Urdu, and I wrote for many different publications. Of course, I experienced disagreements and conflicts on the workplace, but I would connect them to incompatible personalities and character, rather than my gender. Paradoxically, I had more conflict with other women, in most cases due to a clash of mentality. Nowadays, as work opportunities are open to women in almost every industry, women and men work together across the board, and gender-based discrimination does not seem to be a prevalent issue.

***EGIC: For the past couple of years you have also been involved in a new adventure, running your own blog “Dahlia’s News on Saudi Arabia” Do you believe you bring on a female perspective in your blog? If yes, how so? And why is it important?***

Actually, I made a different choice. In my blog, I am trying to speak from a Saudi perspective including all Saudis, of different genders and social groups. There is, of course, a prevalent perspective, which depends on the subject matter treated.

***EGIC: What is your assessment of the impact of Vision 2030’s reforms on Saudi women?***

I believe that it was high time for a Vision that gives women their opportunities to make choices. Every woman should be able to study, work and follow her talent. Too long have Saudi women been restricted in their choices because doors were closed. With Vision 2030, for instance, we expect education to be improved from early stages. Also job opportunities are opening up for women, and businesses will allow new ideas and opportunities for self-development, creativity and entrepreneurship. And for those women who want to stay at home, this will be a choice, not an obligation. It is very important that the country benefits from those who have the ability to contribute to Saudi Arabia’s development. Specifically, several studies have hinted at the fact that Saudi women can work harder and achieve better results than their male counterparts, both at the workplace and in schools.

***EGIC: What do you think are the issues that remain to be tackled?***

Abolishing the guardianship system in the fastest and smoothest possible way is the biggest issue to be tackled. If this is properly handled, Saudi society will have managed to overcome decades of conflict with tradition and religion, and will have matured into a balanced society.

With Vision 2030, the Saudi government is attempting to restructure the country on fundamental levels, and these changes aren't going to come easily or quickly — especially when they require Saudi citizens to rethink their social behaviour. Guardianship as mentioned in the Qur’an means protection - not subjugation as it is widely understood today. At the time of Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him), daily life was harsher and more dangerous than today, but the Prophet’s first wife Khadija still owned and managed her own businesses. She could control most of the activities relating to her business, but for those operations that involved more danger and physical strain, she had to delegate control to employees, and among them the Prophet, before they married. Today, of course, the world has changed, and Saudi women are perfectly able to manage their businesses themselves.

Therefore, while the guardianship system was originally aimed at giving privileged treatment to women, this is the reality today, unfortunately. Take the provision that women have to have their guardians approve of their travels: it was meant as a protective measure for minors and women traveling to dangerous countries but became a serious limitation to mobility. Luckily, it is being gradually eased and is likely to be removed, having already changed from the need for the guardian’s signature for each journey to multi-travel blanket approvals.

It is unfortunate that the argument of halal (allowed in Islam) and haram (not allowed in Islam) has been misused in a way that made guardianship a tool of oppression. Religion was politicized through tradition and those most vulnerable were more easily influenced. This is what the government has to confront, and I hope it will be successful. Lifting the driving ban and opening up

almost every sector for women to work in, in my opinion proves the government's support for wider change.

***EGIC: Can you speak a little on how do Saudi women perceive those rapid changes? Is there any sort of opposition from the female camp?***

The impact of changes has been rapid for everybody living in Saudi Arabia. Saudis always believed that change was eventually going to happen, and a lot of Saudis pushed in this direction. Yet all these (positive) changes happened at once. It is therefore key to monitor that everything promised is implemented, rather than perpetually delayed, as it used to be the case in Saudi Arabia when it came to implementing new laws or reforms. Saudi women are ready. Education, awareness, talent, ambitions - we have it all, in every field. We were just waiting for the starting gun. There are of course those who are afraid, for both right and wrong reasons. A relative said to me that she is against all those opportunities given to women, even in the social field like attending concerts, as she thinks that it is against religion and we are the land of the two Holy Mosques. A few years ago a campaign was launched on social media by women under the slogan "My Guardian knows what is best for me". I hope that Saudi females from all age groups will respect the freedom we regained (our given right) and manage it maturely and responsibly. Finding the balance will for sure take time, training, trial and error, growing awareness and learning how to for carry new responsibilities. A blind person who regains his eyesight will need time to get used to light.

***Thank you so much for your precious time!***