



Women in the Gulf

An EGIC Investigative Series

Interview with Sahafa Al-Sahafiyya (Pseudonym)

Freelance Journalist, Sultanate of Oman.

Introduction

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) continues to be interested in exploring the evolution of the political, economic and social lives, and roles, of women in the Arab Gulf 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 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 is undergoing rapid alteration and women are increasingly seen as active citizens making important 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 in key positions as Ministers of State and other representative posts. Others — re: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait — have long had 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 interview, we address the issue of women in journalism in the Arab Gulf. To do so, the EGIC's programme manager Cinzia Bianco sat with Sahafa Al-Sahafiyya (pseudonym), a freelance journalist based in the Sultanate of Oman in July 2017. Sahafa, a young, but experienced professional in journalism, previously worked with an International News Agency and produce a

number of exclusive stories, particularly in the field of business journalism, from Oman and the Arab Gulf. We asked her about her experience as a GCC-based journalist, the challenges she encountered and the opportunities for positive changes in the upcoming future.

EGIC: During the course of your experience, did you register any significant evolution in the role of women in journalism in Oman and the Arab Gulf? Do you find that the number of women employed in the sector is increasing?

Sahafa: To a certain extent, social media channels allowed more women to stand out in the media industry. Having said that, women employment in journalism and traditional media didn't see any significant evolution in the Gulf. Although the number of girls graduating with journalism and other media-related jobs like broadcast is higher than male graduates, **women are mainly being employed in public communication departments rather than in professional media companies.**

EGIC: In your opinion, which is the main news source (TV channels, social medias, written press, state or privately owned publications), in which women are more likely to be employed? Why do you think is the case?

Sahafa: In the Arab Gulf, **female journalists are more likely to be employed in the state-owned media** outlets. The reason for that is that in our region there is still a general preference to work for the government organizations and the public sector as these types of employers offer shorter working hours, better social status and other benefits. Crucially, professionals working in the public sectors are less likely to lose their jobs as a result of poor performance because these entities do not follow Key Performance Indicators nor do they strictly link career advancement to professional performance.

EGIC: In your personal experience is it different for a female journalist from the Gulf region to work with an American or a European male colleague as opposed to a male colleague from the Gulf?

Sahafa: It is actually easier for female journalists from the Gulf to work with Western male colleagues as opposed to locals. Expats are seen as being less judgmental, as they have fewer cultural bias, and less likely to misinterpret professional interactions of female journalists for personal interest. I think, overall, female journalists from the Gulf are more relaxed to work with expatriate male journalists and even to engage in healthy competition with them.

EGIC: According to your personal experience which aspect of your job as a journalist is the most challenging for women?

Sahafa: Unfortunately, verbal harassment by officials and other sources still happens, and more commonly to women journalists than to their male colleagues. Sometimes, it seems as if women are expected to take mistreatment as an inevitable part of the job. Also, while male journalists can get access to information by spending a late night with officials and sources in places like Sheesha cafes, or bars, women can't get access to similar circumstances as it would be considered culturally inappropriate and likely opposed by their families.

EGIC: Is there any particular aspect related to your profession which is considered in contrast with traditional thinking in Oman and the Gulf?

Sahafa: In particular, constant interaction with calls, and meetings with individual of the opposite gender might still be problematic. As women, also the highly flexible working hours commanded by the nature of the profession can be in contrast with the traditional thinking regarding the role of women in family and society.

EGIC: Does the employment of educated women in the journalism sector have a positive impact in undermining some of the traditional prejudice regarding the status of women in the Gulf region?

Sahafa: The number of educated women and degree-holders is higher than men, but the market shows the opposite when it comes to employment. For instance, almost two-thirds of the unemployed degree-holders in Oman are females. Women, in general, are less attractive candidates by employers for a number of reasons, for example related to work-life balance requirements. At the same time, women are pickier when it comes to choosing the work location compared to men.

EGIC: What is your opinion regarding the rise of Gulf-based satellite news networks, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya: is it an opportunity or a challenge for indigenous journalists, especially female journalists?

Sahafa: I think it's both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity to adopt high professional standards and practices in journalism and media. It gives indigenous journalists an avenue to interact and learn from the high-level editorial teams at these news networks, so they can apply these practices to current and future media outlets. On the other hand, these networks and other international media with offices in the Gulf prefer to hire Arab expats from Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, who, generally speaking, have lower requirements in terms of working conditions. This leaves less room for indigenous journalists to work in these networks.