

Moving on up

Women lawyers globally struggle to climb the career ladder. Amber Melville-Brown reports on progress in the region

"I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king."

Elizabeth I of England to her massed troops at Tilbury in the face of invasion by the Spanish Armada in the August 1588

Centuries after Queen Elizabeth I rallied her troops, other formidable characters have battled against the cliché of woman as the weaker sex and many striving to obtain a voice, equality and ultimate power have been lawyers. The Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher, a barrister, became the UK's first female Prime Minister in 1979; Yale graduate Hilary Clinton is seeking to swap the power behind the throne of former US President Bill Clinton, for the throne itself to be the first female US president; Finland's president is a woman lawyer, Tarja Halonen; and barrister Mary McAleese is the president of the Republic of Ireland.

In the past, some outside observers have mistakenly written off women in the Middle East as mere shadows of their men folk. But women in several GCC countries now have the right to vote and a number of women are in senior positions of power. Sheikha Haya Al Khalifa, for example, a leading Bahraini lawyer, has just completed a year as the president of the United Nations General Assembly, only the third woman to fill the role.

"Perhaps in the past we lagged behind," Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has said. But in the last 20 years, Dubai has changed from a poor pearl fishing town, where the women undertook the role of looking after the home and the family for months on end, while the men were away, into a vital and vibrant business and tourist hub. Sheikh Mohammed accepts that "Arab women are half our community" and wants them to achieve heights and goals for their own ends and for the good of the country.

Since 1971 when the seven emirates formed

the UAE, the rights of women in society have been incorporated into the country's constitution, which proposes to preserve the protection of the family, the dignity of women and their identity. It also aims to facilitate "conditions appropriate for a prosperous life and suitable work which is in accordance with their nature and capabilities as mothers and wives and as workers".

Traditional stereotypes

The cynical might suggest that this is pejorative and patronising. But, there are many different skills involved in being a lawyer, and no-one has them all. Take the traditional stereotypes: oratory and argument are generally associated with men, and persuasion and reasoned debate, with women – yet both can serve clients' needs dependent on the circumstances. Some opponents need to be treated forcefully, a man's preserve? But doesn't the stay-at-home mum need to be forceful when warning a child that is running towards a busy road?

It's another stereotype that woman can multi-task, but that can play out in a woman's favour in the legal world, according to Jasmin Kohina, a partner at Kuwait-based law firm Abdulla Kh Al Ayoub & Associates. "Employers often take into consideration the fact that women employees can undertake multiple tasks and responsibilities and have a role to perform both in the office and towards society [that is, within their families]."

Australian Andrea Jaffar, an associate at Dubai-based law firm Hadeef Al Dhahiri & Associates and mother-of-two, has "fond memories" of "frantically finalising refinancing documentation – two years in the negotiation – on Christmas Eve, during a paper shortage and managing to get into a taxi one hour before my flight departure on holiday". Forgive the stereotyping, but who else but a woman?

During her time as a lawyer in the region, Jaffar was glad to say she hasn't experienced

any sexism, although she candidly conceded that "in some circumstances, when working with clients who have not previously dealt with women at a higher professional level, one has to make a greater effort in order to gain their trust and confidence".

As centuries of women before her, Jaffar does not complain, but rather sees it as another challenge to overcome. "On the whole, working with such a client tends to add to the satisfaction of, not only providing a high level service, but also demonstrating that women lawyers are as effective and capable in this jurisdiction as our male associates."

There are no restrictions to women taking up employment in the law in Kuwait, according to Jasmin Kohina: "Recognition is solely based on performance." And she should know – an Indian-qualified attorney, she is also chairwoman of the Women and the Law Committee of Lex Mundi, an association of independent law firms based in the US, of which Abdulla Kh Al Ayoub is the only Kuwaiti member.

The committee holds sessions on various topics such as business development for women attorneys, rainmaking and client relationship management. Kohina has not come across any instances of prejudice against female lawyers from the judiciary or government officials and told *The Brief* that "Kuwaiti attorneys have always shown great respect to towards their female counterparts and also to foreign female lawyers working in Kuwait".

Respect garners respect

Melika Betley, regional head of legal and compliance officer for the Middle East for international bank, HSBC, says respect garners respect. "The most important thing is that you show respect for the local culture," she says. "And the same respect is shown back to you."

Betley moved to Dubai slightly more than a year ago and her responsibilities now cover the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait,

A woman in a black suit and high heels is climbing a white ladder. The ladder is positioned diagonally across the frame, and the woman's legs are the primary focus. The background is a solid teal color.

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Lebanon, Oman and Pakistan as well as some work in Saudi Arabia. Interacting mainly with internal clients of the bank – a broad cross-section of Emirati, GCC nationals, ex-pats – her experiences, too, have been positive.

“I am treated on my merits. It really doesn’t make any difference – with men or women – that I am a woman.” When instructing outside counsel, she comes across both sexes and is confident that irrespective of gender she is given “the best person for the job”.

Has she seen any less obvious discrimination by way of pay differentials? “Not as far as I am aware,” she laughs, perhaps hoping that no senior male legal figure is cashing in a bigger pay packet than she. But Betley knows the salaries of her team and is “comfortable” that equality is the case there. However, according to UNISON, Britain’s biggest trade union, women in the UK still lag behind men in pay by a staggering 17 per cent. That equates, they say, to women working for nothing from October 30 every year. It seems likely that similar discrepancies will appear in other regions. Perhaps when women are just beginning to find their feet in the work place in the Middle East, pay equality might go overlooked or even unquestioned.

The world average level of political participation by women is also 17 per cent, while in the GCC region the figure is only nine per cent. This is one of the issues discussed at the end of last month at the Women Making a Difference in Parliament conference in Abu Dhabi – the second regional conference of women parliamentarians and decision makers in the GCC. Under the patronage of Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarek – wife of the late Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan and chairwoman of the UAE’s Women’s Federation and of the Arab Women’s Network – it is open to women members of parliament, or where there are none, women in decision-making positions in the GCC, with Yemen as an invited observer.

Its aim is to “strengthen women’s knowledge of political processes; promote an exchange of experience between women coming from a similar cultural and political background” and to “maintain visibility on the question of women in politics and encourage participation of women in politics”.

The late president of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, was keen to encourage the involvement of women: “Nothing could delight me more than to see the woman taking up her distinctive position in society ... Nothing should

“Like men, women deserve the right to occupy high positions according to their capabilities and qualifications”

hinder her progress ... Like men, women deserve the right to occupy high positions according to their capabilities and qualifications.”

Female members of the various royal families – such as Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi, a member of the Sharjah Royal family and the first woman in a UAE cabinet post as economics and planning minister – can inspire and encourage women to fulfil important professional roles beyond the family. “A number of members of the Al Nahayan and Al Maktoum families are and shall continue to be inspirational and instrumental in the advancement of the role of women in Dubai and the Arab region,” says Hadeef Al Dhahiri & Associates’ Jaffar.

Male preserves

There are several women lawyers working in Kuwait, according to Lex Mundi’s Kohina, and most work in-house for the government in the ministries or in state-owned corporations. But there is one area of the law they avoid. “Women attorneys do not like to attend to criminal investigations at police departments,” she says.

Another area traditionally the main preserve of male lawyers in the region is litigation. “It is probably fair to say that, traditionally, this sector has been dominated by the male professionals,” says Jaffar. But female advocates are on the rise in the UAE and gaining prominence and respect within the profession. “My male colleagues who are involved in the advocacy side would say ‘female advocates are giving us a run for our money’.”

According to HSBC’s Melika Betley, there are “no barriers to women progressing generally”, unless those barriers are self-imposed. “Some women might feel restricted as to what they would want to do from a career or family perspective – and that might be rooted in the way that they have been brought up – but this is their own choice.” For some female lawyers, the choice will be both to pursue their legal career

and to have a family.

Jaffar moved to Dubai in 1995. She is now a partner at Hadeef Al Dhahiri, whose Dubai office boasts and impressive 40 per cent female lawyers. She outlined the common sense position that, while she saw no impediment for the advancement of women within the legal profession specific to the UAE, there are “the same challenges that women face in any other part of the world”. They include “the demanding hours and often inflexible transactional schedules which inhibit the achievement of the ever elusive ‘work/life’ balance, particularly when children are introduced to the equation”.

Learning how best to balance work and family, sharing legal and other problems and solutions, training and networking with like-minded people can be invaluable to the smooth running of a successful practice. One regional organisation doing its bit to help women lawyers and to highlight the issues they face is the Arab Women’s Legal Network.

This not-for-profit, non-governmental body, explains Rula Dajani, its fundraising consultant, was conceived and founded in Lebanon in 2005. Its aim is to “empower women in the legal sector and to raise public awareness of women in the legal profession, to enable them to compete, to have equal access and to participate in positive change”.

Its membership of more than 460 lawyers is spread across 18 countries, with a board consisting of seven judges. It is not a lobbying organisation, per se, but in addition to facilitating meetings and providing a forum for the exchange of ideas on challenges facing women, it will highlight questions that need to be asked. For example, Dajani says 33 female judges have been appointed in Cairo, yet none of them has as yet assumed responsibilities. Why not?

Cultural changes

Is it daunting for a non-Arab woman lawyer to come to work in the region? Melika Betley says it is not, other than facing the fear of the unknown. “This is a region that you come to not knowing what to expect. You don’t know if there will be any significant cultural change or whether you will have to adapt your behaviour. For example, people talked about being careful not to shake hands and, until you see how that operates in practice, it can be stressful, as you don’t want to offend anyone.”

Now she is here any initial concerns are, “in day to day life, not a big deal”. The legal world

of the UAE, she says, is such a multi-cultural centre, with locals, ex-pats, members of the Indian community, that she doesn't feel any different working here than anywhere else. "Possibly, as a woman, I feel even safer working in an environment with a very low crime rate. Although I think you would probably feel the same here if you were a guy."

One western female lawyer was reluctant to speak about her experiences in the UAE, notwithstanding that they were also, she says, entirely positive. Nonetheless, she didn't want gender to be an issue. But to some extent gender cannot but be an issue. Individuals' constituent parts affect how they are perceived: lawyer, corporate lawyer, black corporate lawyer, female black corporate lawyer. Discrimination, of some type and degree, is inevitable.

And it may not come from where you expect. At this year's International Bar Association Conference in Singapore, Roxana Kahale of Kahale Abogados in Buenos Aires, made a worrying observation: "Discrimination is there from men, but it is also there from women lawyers. Many successful women lawyers enjoy being the only successful woman lawyer at a law firm and they resent the success of others."

Rula Dajani maintains the Arab Women's Legal Network is in the planning stages of a conference in Dubai in the spring of 2008 to provide a forum for women judges of the region to unite network and share experiences. Dubai was chosen as a "neutral" venue, says Dajani. Therefore, it is interesting, as Jaffar points out, that there is "an obvious absence of any female judges in the UAE".

This notwithstanding, Jaffar says: "The current generation of UAE lawyers is extremely fortunate to live and work in such a dynamic and critical part of the world at this point in time." Female lawyers fight for the rights of their clients and need to fight for their own rights, and the inspiration of successful expatriate and local female lawyers in the region may encourage a new generation of local women to take up the law as a profession – and perhaps even eventually to obtain a seat on the bench.

As Elizabeth I said: "Anger makes dull men witty, but it keeps them poor." Poor treatment, inequality and discrimination, towards a female lawyer, her colleagues or her clients, should not be faced with anger, a wasted emotion.

And to paraphrase another saying: "Don't get angry, get even." ●

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Women doing the business

Opportunities for women to succeed in commerce vary across the Middle East. Kathryn Young looks at the region's prospects

"Elevating women is a strategic objective for the UAE and reflects the trust and commitment of the leadership towards developing women and their role in society," Princess Haya Bint Al Hussain said at the New Arab Woman Forum held in Dubai at the end of October.

The two-day conference looked at the role of women in Middle Eastern society and discussed the progress made over the past few years in relation to the position of women in the business world. And earlier this month, the role of women in regional government also fell under the spotlight as Sheikha Jawaher Bint Mohammad Al Qasimi, wife of the ruler of Sharjah, called for new female members of the UAE's Federal National Council should be given time to show their worth.

"Women members are expected to play a more active role in decision-making," she said in a newspaper interview. "We know the experience is new. We just hope women can gain the people's trust as they gained the government's support." Several of the high-profile speakers at the Arab Woman Forum came to a similar conclusion – while many countries have made significant progress in the development of women's rights, there still remains room for improvement.

Saudi Arabia is one of the countries with most scope for growth as the kingdom continues to impose some of the tightest restrictions on women in business.

Explains Lama Abdul Aziz Suleiman, board member of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry: "Women in Saudi are not given licences to run their own business. It has to be in the name of a man. The number of Saudi women in the labour force is only 14 per cent. They only work in education, health and social fields. Women graduates in other fields are not allowed to work, even if they have higher qualifications."

Removing obstacles

However, there are signs that change is afoot even in this most traditional of nations. So far this year, Saudi businesswomen have appealed to the Ministry of Labour to remove obstacles that hamper their progress and restrict their investment projects. They claim that bureaucratic hurdles and problems in obtaining loans are limiting women's ability to invest in Saudi.

"There are a lot of lucrative business and investment opportunities for women in the kingdom," commented one businesswoman in a statement published by Middle East and North Africa Financial Network News, "but the difficulty in receiving licences and a lack of visas are obstructing their investment plans".

Saudi women have also recently petitioned the government to try to overthrow the ban on women motorists that exists in the kingdom.

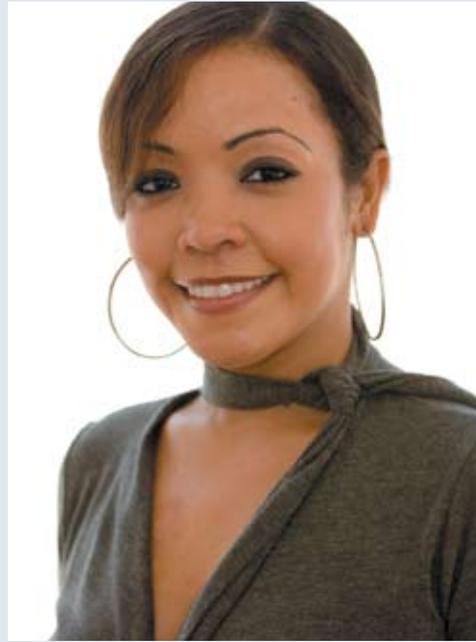
The UAE is far more liberal in its attitude and approach. The proactive steps taken by the government to secure opportunities for women have ensured that females face no restrictions in the business world.

"Sheikh Mohammed has been the driving force behind pushing women into the limelight," says Rahma Himid, joint managing partner of Dubai-based Strawberry PR & Events, a boutique public relations company. "You've got a lot of dynamic women who are being very well supported by the government. He has set an example that you can do it if you try," she continues.

"Sheikha Lubna [UAE minister of economy and planning] is one of the biggest role models," says Abier Hamidi, Himid's business partner. "She has shown other women what is possible."

Going into business

Himid and Hamidi have certainly made the most of the openings available to them. The



Business partners Abier Hamidi (far left) and Rahma Himid set up Strawberry PR in Dubai and praise Dubai's ruler as being a driving force for women's success in the emirate

ROLE MODEL

Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi is one of the most high-profile and successful businesswomen in the Gulf region. Voted number 99 in Forbes' Top 100 Most Powerful Women list for 2007 and 20th in a recent regional power list compiled by *The Times* newspaper, Sheikha Lubna has been the Minister of Economy and Planning of the UAE since November 2004 – the first woman to hold a ministerial post in the region. Although a member of the ruling family of Sharjah, Sheikha Lubna has never been one to rest on her breeding. She graduated from California State University of Chico with a Bachelor of Science degree in computer science and also has an MBA. Lubna is admired widely throughout the country and the region. "I know I'm a role model," she says. "Now we have to show the world what we can do."

FEMALE FACTS

- Women comprise 35 per cent of the workforce in the Gulf region.
- Almost 52 per cent of Dubai's workforce is female.
- Some 77 per cent of women go to higher education in the UAE – the highest rate in the world.
- The contribution of UAE national women to economic activity was 5.4 per cent in 1995. In 2004 it had jumped to slightly more than 16 per cent.
- Females constitute 66 per cent of the workforce in the UAE government sector.
- Women take up 10 per cent of the diplomatic sector positions in the UAE.
- Women occupy 22.5 per cent of the Federal National Council seats.

Source: AME Info

pair launched Strawberry PR at the end of 2004. From modest beginnings, when they worked out of Hamidi's apartment, the company now has an estimated monthly turnover of US\$100,000.

Both acknowledge the difficulties in setting up a new business, but believe that all new starters encounter similar problems – regardless of gender.

"We didn't know where to start in setting up our own business. People told us horror stories about the licences you needed and that you had to have a certain amount of money in your bank account," explains Hamidi. "Starting our own business was one of the most difficult things we have done. But I don't think it was made any more difficult because we are women."

Uma Ghosh Deshpande and Ruchi Khanna agree. "When we were setting up our production house it was the paperwork that took longer than anything else – there always seems to be some document missing – but I think men experience the same frustrations in setting up a new business," Ghosh reveals.

Ghosh and Khanna are the glamorous faces behind Queenbee Media, the production company responsible for *High Life Dubai*, the first magazine TV show to be broadcast from the emirate. The two teamed up in 2005 to launch the company and cite the business culture of Dubai as a significant draw to their deciding to branch out on their own.

"Dubai has the framework in place for women to be entrepreneurs and has the opportunities to encourage it," Ghosh says.

Khanna adds: "Dubai is becoming a big metropolitan city that understands the stance of working women. The environment is very conducive for entrepreneurship and, as a result, more and more women are going down that route. Women are now taking more risks at different levels and in different industries. The idea of women being stay-at-home mums is now a misconception as more and more women are

juggling the responsibilities of a career with that of being a mother."

Global affect

The proliferation of international businesses in the UAE has helped to change the way women are treated and regarded. "The western influence in Dubai has certainly helped us get to where we are now," explains Abier Hamidi. "It has opened a lot of doors for women. People living in the UAE have been encouraged to embrace western attitudes to women and to work," she continues.

Evidence suggests businesswomen don't face any particular prejudices peculiar to the region – rather they must simply cope with the same challenges faced by women all over the world.

"I have not encountered any sexism so far in the Middle East. I think that all countries have their own politically correct attitude to sexism, but the reality is always the same – we have to outwork, outperform and outmanoeuvre all of our male peers in order to get ahead," laughs Marion Lovell, executive chef and food and beverage manager at Emirates Al Maha Desert Resort and Spa.

Lovell was headhunted by a Dubai Agency for the role and she joined the team in July 2007 as the first female executive chef working for Emirates worldwide – a fact that some seem to struggle to come to terms with. "I have had a very positive experience with Emirates, though have had a less encouraging response from some outside sources, like suppliers. I am constantly called 'Sir' or addressed as 'Mister' as the general belief is that I cannot be a woman. I have stopped using one supplier as his attitude towards me was so demeaning that I can no longer work with him," she recalls.

Ghosh and Khanna have also only encountered occasional episodes where their gender has had an influence on people's behaviour. "We have experienced occasions where men don't like to take orders from women and in such instances the situation can become very heated, but that is certainly not an everyday occurrence," Khanna reveals. The pair also maintains that displays of prejudice can be used to women's advantage. "If you experience sexism it should be a driving force to make you more determined to succeed. It shouldn't be a barrier to success," Ghosh adds.

It seems any barriers that still exist for women are gradually coming down. And more often than not it is women themselves who are bringing down the blockades. ●

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