

Brains Under the Veils

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“DON’T forget we have brains under our veils,” said Iranian Nobel Laureate Shireen Ebadi.

This is what Edit Schlaffer, founder of the internationally-acclaimed non-profit-organization Women Without Borders, experienced working with Saudi women.

Schlaffer and her female team are in Riyadh to conduct ‘This is Me!’, a workshop on self-presentation skills, career and beyond with 82 Saudi women.

“I am very impressed to know how highly educated, curious, and bright Saudi women are,” Schlaffer told The Saudi Gazette in an exclusive interview. The workshop also overcame culture clichés, assumptions and stereotypes of Saudi women.

Contrary to Western stereotypes, Schlaffer discovered that Saudi women were positive, forward-looking, goal-oriented, very open-minded and confident.

She felt women in Saudi Arabia have a strong sense of community and family and at the same time they have strong identities.

Saudi women want to have a family life but are also very keen in pursuing a career and are very eager to give back to society, explained Schlaffer.



Schlaffer was amazed to see so many women were qualified in specialized fields such as computer science and natural sciences which are still strongly dominated by men in the West. "I was also amazed at the high number of Saudi women who were moving into IT, which is very smart and good; I encourage women to do so," said Schlaffer.

Commenting on the current situation of women in Saudi Arabia, Schlaffer said that it was an important and crucial time for women in the Kingdom.

"The government has opened up and there are a lot of initiatives being taken to empower women and encourage women's participation in the development of society," she said.

Schlaffer also referred to the high rate of unemployment among Saudi women. "It is a waste of time to train and educate women and then they stay unemployed and are unable to use their skills to better their society and economy," she bemoaned.

When women are represented in public life, they will raise women and family issues which will benefit society at large, explained the founder of Women Without Borders.

"Educated mothers raise more balanced children. And we live in a very critical time. We all need to contribute to a better future and women must contribute together," she said.

Schlaffer founded Women Without Borders five years ago while she was conducting a project in Pakistan. At that time Taleban had taken over Afghanistan. "The situation became very bad for women in Afghanistan and as a woman I wanted to know what I could do to make the situation for women known," explained Schlaffer

"What happened was terrible, women were prevented from going to work, school and even to doctors. Girl students were banned from school and even prevented from being treated by a female doctor, but the women in Afghanistan worked together, some opened schools in their homes so that the girls wouldn't miss out on their education while female doctors received female patients for treatment. All of this was happening secretly away from the gaze of the Taleban," said Schlaffer.

She documented the brutal situation Afghan women endured and informed the world.

Schlaffer was impressed by how many women worked together to make a difference and formed the non-profit organization Women Without Borders.

The organization's mission is to create a platform for women, where they can come together and start a dialogue for peace.

"In these critical times politically, it is important to improve our understanding among people and cultures and women have very good negotiation skills to contribute with. Women are very good in verbalizing their concerns and they are good in tackling social issues," she explained.

As an international initiative for women in politics and civil society, Women Without Borders offers women a forum so that their voices can be heard and their concerns made public. The organization

supports women all over the world as they strive towards the inclusion and participation of women in all levels of decision-making processes, and to bring their talents and energies in to the public arena.

Schlaffer is also conducting a four-country survey “Closing the gap, looking into the future of women leadership’. The survey is currently being conducted in the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Morocco and Saudi Arabia.

Schlaffer is a social scientist, author and activist. Her research focuses on women in international politics, women as agents of change in politics and civil society, as well as inter-personal relationships in the modern world. Her numerous publications have earned critical acclaim. Today her activities target the need for female capacity-building at the professional and political level and the need for gender-just societies.

From Competence to Confidence

“I promise myself to become a mother that my son can be proud of,” “I promise myself to become a successful entrepreneur,” “I promise to always believe in myself.’ These are just a few of the promises young Saudi women made themselves at the end of the ‘This is Me!’ workshop.

United Nations Development Program, Women without Borders and Prince Sultan University jointly spearheaded the first personal and professional positioning training for young Saudi women’s workshop.

The 82 participants at this training program were senior-year university students from Prince Sultan University, King Saud University and the Women’s Educational Colleges in Riyadh.

The main objective of the workshop was to “train national trainers” on presentation and communications skills to enable them to train their young Saudi colleagues in the future, and create new opportunities in the business world in response to the labor market needs.

“I felt a lot of determination among young participants. I am sure they will make a difference in their lives, in society after this workshop,” said Edit Schlaffer, founder of the internationally-acclaimed non-profit-organization Women Without Borders.

Schlaffer was personally participating in the workshops interacting with Saudi women and coaching them.

“Our mission statement is to educate women with competence and confidence,” she explained. And this was achieved, according to the participants.

“We were taught how to turn our weaknesses into our strength. I used to be not as self-confident and I learned how to build on that,” said 21-year-old Maha Al-Rasheed.

Some participants also made life-changing decisions during the workshop.

Sara Al-Jehani, 21, realized that marriage didn't have to be her number one priority at this time in her life and that she really wanted to focus on her career.

Twentyone-year-old Haifa Al-Malik, a business management student from King Saud University, discovered that she wanted to continue her education. "I realized that I want to continue my education with MA, then a Ph.D. I also learned that I am an ambitious and an open person," said Malik.

The workshop was specially tailored for Saudi women.

"We added a special exercise 'My Space' in which participants learn what they really want from life and how to combine both a family life and a career," explained Schlaffer.

"It used to be the case that women would either have a family life or a career but today women can have both. And the exercise teaches the young women how to achieve that. Women in Saudi Arabia are very family-oriented but they are also very ambitious and career-oriented," explained Schlaffer.

'My Space' also gives the opportunity for women to talk about their concerns.

The young participants were mostly concerned about finding a job. "Although this is a concern among the young generation across the world, in Saudi Arabia there is a high number of graduates and the small number of employed women resulting in a huge talent pool sitting at home," explained Schlaffer.

The workshop encourages female participants to look inside and gain the right skills to walk into the future and to feel comfortable with themselves.

Even the title of the workshop 'This is Me!' is a lesson in itself. "Women use too many question marks and not enough explanation marks," explained Schlaffer. "Women must be firm and stand by their views and this workshop teaches young women to do so.

If women present themselves with 'This is me, this is what I can contribute with,' then women will have more to give to society."

The participants were introduced and trained in the art of self-presentation to promote their personal and professional positioning (competence to confidence), professional CV writing and business correspondence, essential business etiquette and self-expression skills