



46 GENDER AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

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Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to investigate changing configurations and forms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's cultural heritage and how they affect women's needs in regard to services, amenities and specific facilities. The study of women's role in Saudi society describes the interrelationship between gender and the environment and it opens up the analysis of the sphere of activities that are directly relevant to women's education and productivity. The development of Saudi women's education started with the establishment of the first girls' school in Saudi Arabia in 1956 and has evolved over the years affecting women's role in the Saudi society.

Authors of the book, *The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, (1974) note that there were a quarter of a million girls in full-time education. Before 1960, girls' education was generally limited in scope and haphazard in organization, available only in the larger cities such as Jiddah, Mecca, Medina and Riyadh. As it was not socially acceptable for a girl to go out of the house on her own, she would receive lessons from a private tutor or in a small group known as a *Kutab*. Sufficiently wealthy families would employ for their daughters private teachers who lived with the family and in many cases acted not only as tutor and advisor, but also as nurse and companion to the children.

In the late 1960s, more organized teaching groups started to appear, and private schools spread to other cities. The girls who learned at these schools or privately in their homes took the same exams and received the same certificate as boys, but mixed education has not been adopted in Saudi Arabia.

In 1959-60, the first group of girls studying at the school were able to present their primary school certificates. As the Saudi Government approved girls' education in the same year and opened some of the first state primary schools, the need then arose for intermediate (junior high) schools. In 1960, classes for teaching students at the intermediate level were opened. In 1963, the first group of girls graduated from the intermediate school (the equivalent of the 9th grade in the American system).

Intermediate education was taken over by the Government for the first year and the school followed the program of the Ministry of Education with the help of a very small staff, most of whom were not adequately qualified. At the end of the school year 1964-65, the first group of secondary school students graduated from Dar el-Hanan, seven in sciences and one in arts subjects. They were the first group of girls to graduate from any regular school in the Kingdom. At that point the need for a better building was urgent and work started

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on the new school which now exists. By 1966, the year in which the school moved to its new location, the intake of students had risen to 620, rising further to 1,050 in 1973.

In 1969-1970 the Administration of Girls' Education opened a Teachers' Training College in Riyadh. By that time, a fully developed administrative staff had been established and girls were able to follow a well-planned educational program at all levels. Furthermore, the government invested responsibility for girls' education in a group of religious leaders who formed what is now known as the Administration of Girls' Education. This body is effectively a Ministry but remains independent of the Ministry of Education. Education for women is now available in every village, town and city. According to the statistics about girls' education, there are 500 communities with schools for girls, well over the target of 300 set by the five-year plan ending in 1975. School construction projects in hand by 1975 would, when completed, provide the government school system with 129 elementary schools, 30 intermediate schools and 10 secondary schools.

One of the difficulties involved in the rapid expansion of education is the recruitment of enough people with sufficient academic qualifications willing to become teachers. Therefore, a considerable number of non-Saudi teaching staff had to be employed. However, in the next decade the non-Saudi staff are to be replaced gradually by local staff. Today women's education development has enlarged to a great extent trying to enable the Saudi woman to enlarge her capabilities to the fullest, and to put these capabilities to the best use in social and cultural issues. Thus, female education makes up a vigorous program of learning for the young Saudi woman. In addition, many Saudi universities are holding several international and local symposia with the aim of providing Saudi women with their special needs, particularly in the field of cultural and environmental control and environments within the context of congruence and opportunities. Currently, there is a great deal of concern about Saudi women's interdisciplinary role in contemporary development.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical framework of this study is based on an in-depth exploration of the relationship between the historical evolution of women's education in Saudi society and their degree of contribution in the process of development. Therefore, we tried to capture the seeds of changes especially in the field of education, and interrelate these changes with the technological, economical, social, and cultural development and, in turn, women's role in the society. Contemporary Saudi women understand that economic growth based on the petroleum boom is not enough and what is needed is education, responsibility, awareness, and ability to communicate in a developed society which respects all Islamic rules. This understanding indicates the need for community services that can enable women to further pursue their education, develop experiences in different fields, and get the chance to socialize and have some recreational

facilities.

Thus, a responsive approach to women's needs would be the creation of community centers and related services that must be built, taking into consideration culture and religion as well as career responsibility. Therefore, we aimed in this study to indicate that there is a need for women policy makers and academics in contemporary Saudi society to work together to bring about political and economic reforms in community design, especially in Saudi society, where culture and religion are the two most important concerns for its structure and design. In light of these ideas, much of the literature on modern cultural formation focuses on both ecological and cultural dimensions and how they affect women's needs, which is one of our major concerns in this paper. On the other hand, Western feminist literature interrelates women's needs to socio-spatial transformations, with the goal of strengthening their role in the environment by creating community centers for women's activities and the development of their education.

Literature Review of Community Centers

Most of the literature on "community centers" has to do with stimulation, maintaining, and deepening a "sense of city", the loss of which is so universally lamented. Community centers are also characterized by their unique role in the creative use of leisure time and for a variety of different activities. Eugene and Barbara Sternberg (1971) note: "We have developed, through the initial study, an 'allergy' to 'standards' in the field of community centers. This is not merely a reflection of an innate bias, but grows out of real fear that we may choke off the urgently needed, new solutions to unprecedented community needs and problems by the familiar process of laying down minimum standards which then become the maximum allowable facilities." They indicate that new ideas should be embodied in the design of community centers in order to meet individual and social priorities, values and needs.

Assessing the Need for Saudi Women's Community Centers

The use of community facilities in the environment necessarily entails a greater emphasis on gender and women's role in Saudi society. The architect Tariq Al-Haj, when asked about the recent direction for architectural projects in Saudi Arabia, was quoted in *Al-Bina* magazine as follows: "Architectural projects in Saudi Arabia nowadays are mostly directed towards multi-functional centers which are serving more than one purpose."

As has been mentioned earlier, the first preliminary school was established by the Government of Saudi Arabia for Saudi women almost thirty-eight years ago, and the progress for educating women since then has multiplied substantially. Fifteen years later, women played a strong role in serving

their community. During that period, the first higher institute for community services for women was founded in Riyadh. The Department of Higher Education started its activities in the academic years 1980/1981 with three specialties: Serving individuals, serving the society, and organizing the community. The main objective of the community institute was to propagate social awareness which is based on Islamic foundations and assessment of Sharia law in women's community fields in different Saudi environments. The institute also aims to train Saudi women who would work as community supervisors in schools and office establishments. Other purposes for facilitating this institute were to provide educational programs for aged Saudi women and to support women who take part in studies of environmental research. The study in this community institute consists of four academic years. The institute provides a diploma in community service after accomplishing the examination test of the second year. This diploma, along with a Bachelor of Community Service, is handed to those who further their education to the fourth year. These are some of the objectives we can name which are tailored by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and relate to the first creation of community services for women in the Kingdom. Recently, this Women's Community Institute has expanded its wings to two sectors, one serving the King Saud University and the other administered by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. This privately-owned complex is the Community Center for Women in Riyadh (Manahil Center) that serves educational, cultural, and recreation purposes.

In the Eastern Region of the Kingdom where we have applied this study, community services have been facilitated as individual institutes, such as the two philanthropic centers in Al-Dammam and Al-Khobar. However, when combined with other recreational and educational sectors, they are either too expensive (e.g. Fatat Al-Khalij Community Center, Al-Khobar) to allow admission for a woman with low to medium income, or they do not attain the quality of service required.

From the earlier analysis regarding women's needs in Saudi society, it is clear that it was difficult to track down and procure good materials about community centers. There were few case studies which fulfilled most of the major components of the building. Therefore, a live case study was one of the most supporting sections which was added to assess the need for community centers. This study put emphasis on social and planning philosophies and on architectural and environmental considerations. Furthermore, it should be added that the formulation of specific standards for community centers tend to create new forms of associations, particularly among women, and to enlarge and strengthen their access to resources.

Case Study Analysis: Fatat Al-Khalaij Community Center, Al-Khobar

Fatat Al-Khalaij Community Center (The Gulf Arabian Women's Community Center) in Al-Khobar was constructed

almost ten years ago. The concept of the Fatat Al-Khalaij started 30 years ago when a group of women decided to establish a small women's community in a house in Al-Khobar as a source to serve the community. Fatat Al-Khalaij has come a long way from that day. As the need for the facilities in this society is very much in demand, the management now is working on an expansion project that will be built on land adjacent to the existing building. The society has already bought neighboring houses to expand its facilities and waits optimistically for the new project to be built.

The building is three stories high with an atrium naturally lighted with domed skylights in the center of the building. The structural system of the building is made out of a steel skeleton system, with central air conditioning in all its spaces except for the w.c., storage and kitchens. A general fluorescent lighting system is distributed equally along the entire building with slight variations in some parts: for example, in the library incandescent spotlights are distributed along the geometrical shape of the library with dimmer switches and two central domes in the atrium which give natural lighting.

The users of the building are divided into four categories: 1) administrators, including managers, teachers, and division heads; 2) students of the computer, English, tailoring, and The Holy Qura'n classes; 3) staff members, including maintenance staff and janitors; and 4) visitors.

The ground floor is used for administration and classes, including child care training, kindergarten and pre-school. The central atrium of the ground floor is used for children's activities such as painting, games, clay sculpturing or book reading. This area is supervised by several members of the society. The first floor includes the main administration office for the whole society, division offices for Foreign Affairs, Social Affairs, the Computer Department and Art Society. It also includes three English classes, one child care class and one meeting room. The second floor opens up to a reception desk. It also includes three computer classes and one stitching and tailoring class. The basement floor had been divided with internal partitions to include two more kindergarten classes. When the Society needs to use the ceremonial hall located in the basement level, all the activities in the basement, including a massage room and a weight room, are shut down. The ceremonies usually occur after seven o'clock in the evening. The gym weight room is then transferred into a back stage for children to dress up.

Other services for women in the Eastern Province are limited to private clubs such as Sun-Set Beach Club or residential compounds or Saudi Aramco; whereas, health education and awareness should be one of the most critical issues, especially when looking at the percentage of cardiovascular diseases in the Saudi women's community. According to a family medicine specialist working in Aramco Hospital, Dhahran, when asked about the percentage of health and food intake related diseases in the women's community who are treated in Saudi Aramco Hospital, "All of the diseases are related to them. The first three very distinct diseases are obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure." Because of this reason in

particular, a women's community center, which covers all social, cultural, recreational and humanitarian needs of women in the Saudi community, would be essential in the Eastern Region and would be a source of encouragement for women to serve their community and to release the social pressure. A diversity of information sources was sought for this paper so as to obtain as much information as possible about how women use and perceive the community center environment in order to met their cultural and social needs in contemporary Saudi society.

Research Methodology

Thirty-two questionnaires were administered to the users of the building. The questionnaire was divided into four major parts. The first three parts asked users to grade specific characteristics of the building from one (highest) to five (lowest). The first question probes how the users perceive the Fatat Al-Khalaij as a building in general. The second question allows the users to give their personal opinions on how the interior of the building fits their needs and in what way the interior design satisfies their social and educational requirements in general. The third question determines how much satisfaction is given by the personal spaces used by those who live in that environment over a longer period of time. Finally, the fourth part of the questionnaire is subdivided into several sections concerning the personal background of the users. Initially, seventy questionnaires were distributed to different categories of users, but only thirty-two were returned. The small number of completed questionnaires made the analysis difficult because the last section of the questionnaire, which asked for background information, was mostly not answered. In addition to the questionnaires, participant observation methodology was used to observe women's behavior in the community center in their everyday living environment, and personal interviews of students and office staff members were also done.

Findings

Through the analysis of the questionnaires, space user sheets, personal interviews, and participant observation, several issues concerning space programming, circulation patterns, desired and undesired qualities in spaces, and environmental behavioral patterns were concluded. Results indicate that women of different age groups, backgrounds and professions were strongly interacting with each other. In general, the women found pleasure in serving the community and their children. Women in the administration department preferred to work as groups at work stations in one room, instead of dividing each unit with high partitions, furniture or plants. Groups of three to five were observed. The results show that women in Saudi society crave to interact among themselves. Based on societal and cultural values, they prefer not to associate with men unless they are family members or they need to contact them for professional purposes. Thus, Saudi women today are trying to reassess their existence in

psychological and social terms to serve their surrounding environment on the micro and macro scale through international science, technology, and developments in various educational, social and cultural fields.

Further analysis of the questionnaire indicates that the most common complaint was that the space was not sufficient for the number of students the community center accepts. It is a normal phenomenon: the preliminary programming of the building accepted only twenty students in one class, whereas the existing classes sometimes consist of as many as thirty.

The English class students complained in the questionnaire about the noise interference from girls talking in the corridors while they were in their class. One of the design failures was locating benches to sit on around the parapet wall of the atrium on the second floor and just opposite to the classroom doors. In addition, observation of the interior of the building reveals that the central atrium mass is quite large and, due to reflective interior surface finishes such as marble, the sound echoes to the entire central area of both the ground and the first floors. In addition, the space function in that particular area is for children's activities which are very noisy. It is recommended that, by applying more sound-absorbing materials to the internal surfaces, the building's noise reflectance level may be controlled. Also, the primary problem of lack of space in the building would be taken care of by constructing the expansion project. The current problems in the existing building should be avoided while the expansion project is materialized.

The importance of this analysis is with respect to its applicability to future community center designs. Furthermore, the results of this study are related to Eugene and Barbara Sternberg's (1971) ideas that, "We are not professionals in community design or operation: we are laymen with experiences, interests, and concerns," "You must know where you came from before you can know where you are going." Following this idea, this study points out how the lack of sense of community within the region in the Saudi Kingdom indicates the need for proposing antidotes to cure this problem within Saudi society. An unpublished thesis research in the Interior Architecture Department, King Faisal University in Dammam, indicates the effect of women's involvement as decision-makers in the housing environment and, in turn, in all aspects of social and cultural life. Thus, based on the results, further research is needed for the development of community centers, whether inside or outside the region, to get a better understanding of the problem and, consequently, to improve the quality of women's lives. In addition, the community center will be a source of education, whereas education has become a necessity and not a choice to get the knowledge that can enlighten our world.

Findings of this study led to a proposal for a Woman's Community Complex located in the Western Region of Bahrain in Hamad town, 20Km from Manama. The center includes three major functions. The first function is educational, the second one is recreational and cultural, and the third one is social work and health-care facilities. In

addition to these three major functions, the center is also provided with supplementary facilities for members of the center; e.g. nursery, pre-school, a playground for the children, and an administration area. The project incorporates suggestions obtained from our research and was proposed to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study have indicated the real need for multi-functional community centers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There is a clear emphasis on women's growing concern and involvement in all aspects of contemporary Saudi society. The fast-paced changes and competitive nature of the current social, technological, and economic climate all over the world, and especially in Saudi society, demands that Saudi women be prepared for the challenges that manifest themselves in such an environment. A wide range of political and intellectual factors, such as a self-sufficient environment for women, will enable them to enhance and improve the quality of their life. With this in mind, we recommend the building of many community centers for women that can provide them with services at both micro and macro scales.

It is our belief that the provision of such centers will secure many environmental facilities and enable the growth and prosperity of the users. Furthermore, the flow of changes and community development in Saudi society indicate the real need to enhance and improve women's education, responsibility, awareness, ability to communicate and participate in the economic growth of contemporary Saudi society.

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