

Changing women's lives

Women in the Middle East are taking steps to make a better world for themselves, **Bob Little** reports

In recent years, women's roles have been changing – both in the world of work and in society in general. This change is particularly noticeable throughout the Middle East – and some of this change is being brought about by a development programme for women.

The programme enables women, from all backgrounds, ages and stages of their lives, to identify the practical and realistic steps that they want to take to make a better world for themselves at work, home and in their wider communities, while building the practical skills and confidence to take these steps.

Developed by the Springboard Consultancy (SBC), a UK-based international training company specialising in addressing women's development issues, and supported, in the Middle East, by The British Council, the programme is now being delivered by local trainers throughout the region.

To date, over 11,000 women across the Middle East have completed the programme – more than half of them being in the Kingdom of Saudi

Arabia (KSA). Among the more recent advances in the Springboard material in this region is that, in Yemen, the programme materials have been translated into braille. This innovation may now be extended to the materials delivered in other countries in the region.

According to David Knox, The British Council's Director, Society, Middle East and North Africa, The British Council aims to create international opportunities for people of the UK and other countries. It does this to build trust between people – currently in 110 countries. In the process, it's now a £180m business, principally through English language teaching and examinations.

“Currently, the Middle East and North Africa seems to be characterised by wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions,” he said. “We aim to get ‘beneath’ that and get a deeper understanding of what's going on in the region. The Springboard programme helps us to do this because it's about developing opportunities and supporting the creation of inclusive societies.”

The British Council's work aims to amplify the ‘youth voice’ and young people's participation in their society. It also seeks to improve the wellbeing of women and girls, improve the resilience of people living in conflict-affected societies, engage, through the arts and creativity, to facilitate social change, and to enhance ‘state/citizen relationships’.

Faten Lahham Haidar is part of the team that conducted the research into the development needs for women in the KSA which prompted the decision to introduce the programme to the KSA – and, then, throughout the Middle East.

Among the Middle East's first licensed Springboard trainers, Lahham Haidar managed the project of translating materials and adapting them to suit Arabic culture. Moreover, she has launched the programme in Kuwait, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Qatar and Oman. She is a co-trainer with Jenny

Manal runs the programme for women for city-based women pursuing professional careers as well as for Nubian women and slum dwellers



Daisley – one of SBC’s founders and its joint-CEO – delivering the training of trainers programme in the Middle East.

In addition to Lahham Haidar, among those trained on the first trainers’ course in the Middle East – held in Jeddah – were Shams Al-Abdali and, from Egypt, Manal Saleh. Saleh is the Director of Programmes at Sting for Consultancy. She has been working in the field of women and youth empowerment since 2001, and has conducted grassroots community development work in countries including Egypt, Yemen, and Lebanon.

Saleh has conducted a number of national and international capacity building programmes in the fields of women empowerment, gender equality, community participation and youth development. For the past two years, she has focused on promoting the culture of dialogue and peacebuilding among Egypt’s youth, especially those with different political ideologies. In February 2014, she became a member of the Egyptian national team of Creators of Peace Circles, under the umbrella of Initiatives of Change.

“As a participant, the Springboard programme had a strong, positive impact on me,” said Saleh. “The key thing to remember, as a participant,

is that there’s no ‘magic answer’. You find your own answer through being on the programme and building on your life experience. This is what empowers the women on the programme.

“The Springboard programme is built around five ‘pillars,’” she added. “Confidentiality and establishing a trusting environment are two. The others are taking a holistic approach – seeing each participant as a whole person, embracing the roles of worker, sister, mother, daughter, and so on – approaching the programme in a non-prescriptive way and really wanting to be on the programme.”

Saleh runs the programme for women for city-based women pursuing professional careers as well as for Nubian women and slum dwellers. To date, over 300 women have completed the programme in Egypt and, said Saleh, “It started as a community programme aimed at empowering women in underprivileged areas. It’s now attracting participants from multi-national companies, along with those working in secondary and tertiary education. The programme continues to prove its value to all women, regardless of their background, work status and so on.”

Saleh commented that not all the programmes throughout the region are subsidised but, rather,

Jenny Daisley
– co-founder
and co-CEO
SBC





l-r Faten Lahham Haidar, Shams Al-Abdali and Manal Saleh

Lahham Haidar took the programme to Kuwait, under the auspices of the Kuwait Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Delivered in both English and Arabic, the programme received a high degree of positive feedback from the participants

are self-financing. So the scheme is sustainable within the region and it's strongly encouraged by local organisations, as well as by international bodies such as the UN.

"Each Springboard programme takes about three months – and those involved don't have to go to a particular place to take part," Saleh said. "If they wish, they can use the workbook to complete the programme via self-study – and it's possible to set up 'home groups' for coaching and mentoring."

Shams Al-Abdali, Assistant HR Manager at the Alnukaly Int Trading Company, who has helped to introduce Springboard to organisations in Jeddah and Dammam, said, "I heard of the Springboard programme in 2009 and became a participant. The programme made me realise a great deal about myself, my ambitions and goals in life – so I became a freelance, licensed trainer running Springboard."

Over the last five years or so, the programme's popularity has grown impressively. Al-Abdali observed, "In 2010, it was difficult to find women

wanting to participate in a Springboard programme – but now we get lots of women asking to join.

“What’s helped, in Saudi Arabia, is that the Government agency, TVTC, accredited the programme in 2014,” she explained. “It can be difficult for a non-Saudi Arabian course to become accredited but, since the Springboard programme received that accreditation, colleges throughout the kingdom can offer it.

“Every time I conduct a Springboard programme I see the difference in the participants,” said Al-Abdali, “and, every time, it benefits my development as well. Every Springboard programme works well – regardless of the participants’ backgrounds and levels of experience.”

In June, Lahham Haidar, Saleh and Al-Abdali, formed a three-woman delegation to the UK on a study tour – sponsored by The British Council and SBC. On their tour, these three women shared insights with Hannah Boschen, a Springboard trainer at the University of Oxford. In addition to discovering how the programme is being delivered in the UK, they discussed the importance of having a worldwide learning community establishing and maintaining standards.

They interviewed Susha Chandrasekhar, a trustee and legal counsel with The Fawcett Society, in London, gaining insights on campaigning for women’s rights, closing the payroll gender gap and the stages that all such campaigns go through. They also visited the Royal Mail, which currently has 11 in-house trainers who have delivered the Springboard programme to some 1,000 women employees. Royal Mail instituted the programme when the company’s CEO, Moya Greene, realised that women occupied only 20 per cent of leadership positions in the company.

Later, the women met Baroness Prashar, the Deputy Chair of The British Council, to talk about the British Council’s role in advancing women’s development worldwide – but they also touched on how women in the UK are narrowing the ‘gender gap’ at work.

Afterwards, they met Shabana Mahmood MP, the Member of Parliament for Birmingham Ladywood and the Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Lahham Haidar commented, “Shabana explained how she, as a young Muslim woman, can build trust cross-culturally within a local community – as well as how she’s encouraging other women to engage in the political process. It all stems from a belief in the values stressed by the Springboard programme.”

According to Lahham Haidar, “About ten years ago, when I was working in The British Council’s examinations department, I was also active in the

Egypt

Egypt is the 15th most heavily populated country in the world – and 49.8 per cent of its population of 86.2m people are women. Some 85 per cent of the population is Muslim, with the majority of the remainder being Coptic Christians.

Egypt’s first experience of Springboard was in 2012. To date, some 562 women have completed the programme and Rowida Omar, a Program Development Officer at the El-Mahrousa Center for Socioeconomic Development, based at Giza, has delivered eight of the 17 programmes that have been run.

“One participant on the first programme left the programme early – but she now wants to return,” said Rowida. “That’s because her colleague – and rival – completed that programme and, armed with new-found confidence and self-assurance, gained promotion ahead of her.”

Rowida conducts Springboard programmes for academic staff in two universities as well as for women from ethnic minorities in country areas – one on Egypt’s border with Libya and the other on its border with Sudan. Of the 103 women from the universities who’ve completed the programme, three women have gone on to take up the post of Deputy Chair in their department and 76 per cent of the women now represent their faculty in interdepartmental conferences. Of the ethnic minorities’ women who’ve completed the Springboard programme, three have now run for public office, two have represented their group on Egypt’s Constitutional Committee and five of the women have started a co-operative business, making and selling biscuits.

“This demonstrates that, regardless of participants’ backgrounds and circumstances, the Springboard programme really changes women’s lives,” said Rowida.

Saudi Women’s Forum. There was some research, asking women from a variety of backgrounds what they needed. This highlighted the need for soft skills training in such things as commitment and assertiveness. Once Karen Daly-Gherabi, the Assistant Director of The British Council there, found out about SBC, it was a short step to introducing its Springboard programme, which helps women develop these – and other – skills.”

Initially, Daisley ran the Springboard programme as a pilot course – via the medium of English – Jeddah, Riyadh and Dammam.

“I was one of the women on the initial programme,” said Lahham Haidar. “I liked it a lot but it wasn’t delivered in Arabic and it was heavily orientated towards British culture.”

Lahham Haidar’s response was to translate the programme into Arabic and ‘culturise’ it to make it more in-keeping with Middle Eastern culture, traditions and religion.

Having done that, Lahham Haidar took the programme to Kuwait, under the auspices of the Kuwait Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Delivered in



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both English and Arabic, the programme received a high degree of positive feedback from the participants. From there, the programme was run – with continuing success – in Qatar, Oman and Yemen. Lahham Haider even ran the programme in Syria for some four years before the war there.

“In Syria, the programmes were run – with the support of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) – for underprivileged women,” said Lahham Haider. “In addition to working with refugees from Palestine, we also ran the programme for refugees from Iraq – and worked with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). In all, some 300 women completed the programme.

“The programmes that are run in the KSA and Yemen, in particular, attract a wide variety of women,” said Lahham Haider. “Whereas the initial programmes dealt with individuals, we’re now seeing organisations enrolling their employees on the courses. Moreover, the programmes in the KSA used to attract a number of expatriate women. Now, they’re almost exclusively attracting women who were born and bred in Saudi Arabia.

“Among the reasons for this may be that the Saudi Arabian education system, while it’s excellent, doesn’t teach life skills – such as knowing yourself and setting your life goals. However, the Springboard programme focuses on this, so it provides a high quality life skills programme to complement the formal educational system.”

Before joining a Springboard programme, Sumaih, a young woman living in Yemen, was afraid of speaking to other people. She said, “Fear was like a crippling chain. After my mother’s death and an unsuitable love relationship, allied to my underlying fear, I found it hard to arrange my life.”

Bob Little

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Qatar

Enas Adnan I Mustafa, the Assistant HR Executive Director, Training and Development, for the Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) in Qatar, explained that women comprise 25 per cent of Qatar’s workforce. Half of these work in the education sector. Currently, women comprise seven per cent of HMC’s leadership team but this figure is expected to be 30 per cent by 2016.

Enas, who attended the programme in Lebanon, found it extremely helpful and empowering. So, back in Qatar, Enas now runs the programmes. She commented: “The participants on the Springboard programmes always give me inspiration and hope. The feedback from both the participants and the participants’ managers continues to move me.”

But after attending the programme, Sumaih paid for the publication and distribution of her diary – which discussed frankly her views on a number of concerns that, she said, are common to all girls in her culture. She added, “In this culture, writers suffer – and women writers suffer even more – but the whole experience was worth it. I’ve now won a scholarship from the Arabic Foundation for Arts and Culture to write a novel. Springboard has helped me put dots on the letters of my life.”

Another graduate from Yemen is Hayat. Aged 60, and a former worker in the Yemeni Prime Minister’s office, Hayat still wanted to, as she put it, “make a go of life and change routine.” She added, “In Springboard, we broke many habits and conventional ways of thinking. I now believe that nothing is impossible within the teaching of our religion and traditions.”

The oldest member of her group, Hayat has now learnt how to drive, joined the local gym and is studying at the local university for a diploma in religious studies. Hayat said, “My life now is a blessing from God – and it’s because of Springboard. Springboard enables women to move on in their lives.”

The Springboard programme is now available in 43 countries – including the UK. So far, it has encompassed over 230,000 women. Their feedback reveals that 84 per cent of them are ‘more open to change’ after attending the programme; 83 per cent have ‘a more positive attitude’; 80 per cent have ‘increased confidence/self-esteem’; 79 per cent are ‘better at managing change’; 78 per cent have ‘taken on more responsibility’; 75 per cent can provide evidence that they’re ‘better at problem solving’ and 67 per cent can provide evidence that they’re making a ‘better use of resources’. **TJ**