

Gender
D. Times
06.07.05

Gender ju

LUBNA AL OLAYAN IS ONE OF THE FOUR children (and heirs) of Sulaiman Olayan, the late legendary Saudi businessman. Sulaiman was a self-made man who, starting from humble beginnings, rode the oil boom to amass a fortune, estimated at the time of his death to exceed some seven billion dollars.

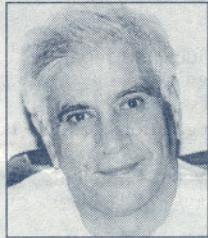
Given her wealth and family background, it was no surprise that Lubna, last year, became the first Saudi woman to be elected to the Board of Directors of a bank, the Saudi-Hollandi Bank. It is also no surprise that she gets invited to — and attends — high-powered international economic conferences that, by definition, are mixed gatherings. Such shenanigans, however, do not amuse the Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh, who has publicly denounced her attendance at such mixed gatherings as “shameful”.

Lubna Olayan can afford to shrug off such attacks. She has “clout”, as they say. As for the average Saudi woman, you can judge the status of her “social rights” from the fact that she is not allowed to drive a car, and the status of her “political rights” from the fact that she is barred from standing as a candidate, or voting, even in municipal elections.

As for “economic rights”, consider this: only last year, for the first time ever, were women allowed to vote directly (ie without having to go through their guardian) for a candidate of their choice in the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce & Industry elections. But no Lubna Al Olayan can even now aspire to be a candidate herself.

Elsewhere in the Arab world matters are a little better, with Kuwaiti women showing plenty of fight to win some basic rights that are commonplace in the rest of the world. But they have a long way to go yet. In neighbouring UAE, Sheikha Lubna Al Qassmi, a forty-something, US educated businesswoman, and a

VIEW



MUNIR ATTAULLAH

Whenever those apologists for the segregation of the sexes talk blithely of “equal but separate” development, I want to shriek that that was the philosophy and rationale of “apartheid”

member of the ruling family of Sharjah, is the minister of Economy and Planning.

I note that though she does not cover her strikingly pretty face, she is always immaculately but modestly dressed. This simple and effective formula, when combined with her quiet, confident, and charming public manner, gets her far greater respect in a male-dominated society than if she dressed as a shuttlecock. The UAE may still be a deeply conservative society, but the ruling families have ensured it remains a tolerant one.

The social and political emancipation of

Justice and Muslims

women has progressed further in Syria, Iraq and Egypt. And even Iran, notwithstanding the rule of the Ayatollahs, is not as repressive as it once was. Given this picture of the plight of their sisters, Pakistani women — particularly those living in the urban centres — should thank the Lord for what they have going for them!

I hasten to add that that is said tongue-in-cheek, for the rights and freedoms one is talking about are absolute ones, and it is insulting to suggest our women should be satisfied with the little they have, simply because those rights happen to be a little more than what others have.

This modest survey has a purpose. For a start, the obvious is worth re-stating: there is no such thing as an all-embracing "Islamic conception" of a woman's role in society; or if there is, then it is obviously subject to heavy and decisive modification by local customs and traditions. But more importantly, what should we conclude of a mindset that is horrified if a Saudi woman interacts professionally with men, but sees nothing wrong if Saudi men routinely meet (professionally and socially) non-Saudi women? Many years ago, did not even the Saudi royal family welcome Queen Elizabeth on an official state visit?

And more generally, why do the sexual peccadilloes of men do no harm to family "honour"; but family "honour" is dangerously besmirched (depending on where you live) should a female member go about unveiled, or attend mixed gatherings, or refuse to marry the man chosen by her parents? Why is "honour" so mysteriously attached to womanhood?

Our apologists have, for umpteen years, given many a specious and unconvincing answer to this question. Some will simply say it is God's will, and it is not for us to question (but not even try and understand?) why he has so ordained. Obviously it is impossible to argue with that line of reasoning.

Nevertheless, it would be fair to ask such people why does the Almighty allow others who are equally his creation but who follow a different religion, a different set of rules? And if the answer to that is that Islamic teachings are the only correct ones, and the followers of other religions are just plain misguided, it remains a puzzle why the Almighty should be so indifferent to the unwittingly sinful fate of the majority of this world's population.

Others can see that the interpretation of the religious edict depends, in actual fact, largely upon the customs, traditions and culture of a particular society. They sense that brainwashing, and how we have been brought up, largely decides what most people think is "right" or "wrong". But not many have the courage — or the desire — to question the value system of their elders, and imbibed by the younger generation in the early formative years of life.

But any rational and half-sane person can tell you what this particular "honour" business is all about: it is, largely, the age-old game of double standards in the pursuit of power of one kind or another. The sops of "respect" and "honour" are cheap and painless favours to bestow on the deprived and the exploited (eg the poor, and women), to make it tolerable for them to meekly accept their fate and not become rebellious and unmanageable. For, in primitive societies — and Pakistan, probably, is not much further advanced — women, for a number of reasons, are wont to be treated as chattels. They are considered as "property", with a social standing only marginally above that of a slave.

"Maternity is a fact; paternity speculation," is an ancient legal maxim that crisply summed up two important social concerns. Firstly, effective and controlled contraception was always virtually non-existent. So a sexual indiscretion by a woman could easily result in a child born out of wedlock,

and that could create enormous complications in a small and static society. Secondly, for thousands of years many a man has spent sleepless nights, tormented by suspicions that his property may well be inherited by an alleged offspring who is not really his flesh and blood.

When such — and other similar — emotional insecurities, subliminally collide with the powerful, but little understood, sex drive, it is easy to see how women — also the economically dependant gender historically — become the target and focus of obsessive male concerns.

If the answer to protecting male egos lay in the curtailment of female freedoms, then so be it. And womenfolk, on the whole, were not averse to social arrangements that theoretically gave them a pseudo-elevated status (as the repositories of "honour") that had some important advantages.

But effective, cheap and self-controlled contraception; fool-proof DNA testing; education, awareness and self-confidence; and the pressure and the desire to be a productive and earning member of society, are all making nonsense of the old rules of the game. If my analysis is even partially correct, it can only mean that the political, social and economic emancipation of women is a one-way street, and there is no looking back. As Hamlet said in another context,

"Let Hercules himself do what he may,
The cat shall mew and dog have his day."

One final thought: whenever those apologists for the segregation of the sexes talk blithely of "equal but separate" development, I want to shriek that that was the philosophy and rationale of "apartheid". And who does not know the atrocities committed under the cloak of that innocuous sounding phrase?

The writer is a businessman