



Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi, left, addresses the Lord Mayor of London and Queen Rania of Jordan at Mansion House. Daniel Aitkenhead

From Iraq to Oman, the future is female

Throughout the Arab world, an increasing number of women are taking on high-profile national roles in finance and commerce. **Helena Smith** reports

Champagne, chandeliers and toastmasters might seem a long way away from the world inhabited by Arab women. Indeed, the City might seem an odd sort of place for Arab women to converge. And, as venues go, Mansion House, the official residence of the Lord Mayor of London, might seem stranger still. But it was to this grandest of Georgian houses that some 300 Arab women, not least Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi, Arabia's first female economy minister, repaired on Thursday for a 'celebration dinner'.

Their mission? Not only to foster links with Britain's commercial heart but to prove that, from Morocco to Oman, women, in this field at least, are beginning to take the lead.

'If you look at the history of Islam, even the Prophet Muhammad married a businesswoman,' said al-Qasimi, who holds what is regarded as the most important cabinet post in the United Arab Emirates. 'Khadija was her name, she was his boss and she recruited him to work with her,' she smiled, as the likes of Cherie Blair worked the distinctly veil-less crowd.

'The West always looks at the veil as a stigma and I think that's the number one problem,' she added, adjusting her own headscarf. 'They think that if women cover themselves, they cut themselves off from important roles, which isn't correct. In the Emirates, I can tell you, women are on rollerblades. They're moving fast in banking and business.'

Dispelling myths is what the California-trained al-Qasimi does best. Since she assumed the post in 2004, the Emirates' economy has flourished. Dubai, a gambling and tourist mecca, is dubbed the Manhattan of the Middle East.

Al-Qasimi is not alone. The decision of London's 678th Lord Mayor, David Brewer, to host the dinner – in honour of the fifth anniversary of the Arab International Women's Forum – highlights the headway females are gradually making across the 22-nation Arab world.

In Saudi Arabia, where an estimated 40 per cent of the nation's wealth is now believed to be in female hands despite the strictures on women in public, a woman was elected last December to head the chamber of commerce – something unthinkable five years ago.

'Arab women are so stereotyped, but if, like me, you're from Bahrain you see change everywhere, in all sectors of business,' says Elham Hassan, a country senior partner at the international accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers. 'It's happening, but it's

coming to different countries at different speeds and is very linked to the pace of education.'

Few regions face as many challenges as the Arab world. Economic development is seen as the single biggest impediment to peace and prosperity in the war-ravaged area. By 2020, it is estimated 80 million jobs need to be created to offset spiralling unemployment as a result of rising populations – a feat that would require unprecedented growth of up to 7 per cent a year. That and the forces of globalisation have added to the realisation that marginalising half the workforce (in Iraq, after years of conflict, women account for 60 per cent of the population) is no longer an option.

Across the Arab world, the penny has finally dropped that women remain an untapped resource that could stoke the engines of stuttering economies and bring about social change. In Jordan, where the number

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of girls in higher education has rocketed, a campaign is encouraging female entrepreneurship by micro-finance and mentoring programmes.

'There may be few women in top positions but their impact is huge,' says Sulaiman al-Hattal, the Saudi Arabian editor-in-chief of *Forbes Arabia*. 'People are frustrated with male politicians. They've seen there's been a lack of serious effort and no serious development in the region, which has made women more credible.'

The oil sector is helping the turnaround. In the Shell building in London last Wednesday, company executives told an audience of mostly female Arab entrepreneurs that the oil giant was reinvigorating its global campaign to recruit women, with emphasis on the Middle East. Dwindling reserves and the fact that oil supplies will become ever more difficult to extract partly accounts for the drive, but so too do the declining numbers worldwide of male graduate engineers.

'There aren't enough people in the talent pool in the petroleum industry, so all companies are getting more aggressive and creative about finding them,' said Roxanne Decyk, director of corporate affairs at Shell. 'That partly explains why we've switched

our search [for employees] to the Middle East and Asia and relaunched this campaign [for women].'

On hearing the news, a group of Iraqi women in the front row – including Raja Khuzai, a former member of Iraq's interim governing council who helped draw up the country's constitution – whooped with delight. 'The younger generation of women in Iraq want to go into business but they need to be supported and trained,' she said. 'I've been writing to Shell for the past three years urging them to do what I've just heard here.'

Several Arab states are as eager to become less reliant on petrodollars. Saudi Arabia, the world's pre-eminent oil producer, is projected to spend \$624bn in the next 10 years investing in the photo-chemical, mining, derivative and tourism industries, as well as on improving its infrastructure.

Others – not least the Emirates and Bahrain – have shown the desire to both liberalise and diversify. 'Arab oil-producing economies realise that oil is a dispensable commodity and that in 100 years' time it may disappear,' says Dr Mohammad Smadi, secretary general at the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce. 'So they're diversifying, which means there will be jobs and opportunities for UK-based companies and the 200,000 Britons already living in the Gulf.'

No other international financial sector is better placed to help open up capital markets, encourage entrepreneurship and generate the foreign direct investment the region so badly needs than the City, says Haifa al-Kaylani, head of the Arab International Women's Forum. 'The future growth of the region must be built on making better use of all its resources, human and natural.'

The hope is that economic reform will lead to political reform (noticeably stalled since the US-led Iraq invasion) and, in a virtuous circle, have wider geopolitical implications.

Women are seen as key to the process. 'When you put women in the limelight it has a tremendous trickle-down effect,' says Professor Assia Alaoui, ambassador-at-large to the King of Morocco. 'We all know that we need to reform but unless you change mindsets and society at large, you can't market reforms, you can't sell them to the people – which is why, from a symbolic point of view, women are so important.'

Al-Qasimi might be the first to agree. By the time dinner was over she was not wearing her pink headscarf. She had cheerily draped it around her shoulders as she walked past the toastmaster, under the Mansion House chandeliers.