

## **GENDER ISSUES IN TEACHER DEVELOPMENT: CAREER CHOICE AND COMMITMENT IN OMAN**

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### **Introduction**

Located in the south-east of the Arabian Peninsula, the Sultanate of Oman is a country of few roads outside of the capital and major towns, and with much difficult terrain. This geography provides the defining economic fact of Oman: oil and natural gas. Fossil resources act as powerful economic and social motors, transporting and transforming societies – though, it should be noted, not always in a simplistic exponential development. Modern Oman was born in 1970, when the present head of state took power. Before this, Oman had been through different phases of independence and power to decline, isolation, semi-colonialism and internal political conflicts that had many negative impacts on all aspects of life. One of the new Sultan's first reforms was to set in motion the foundation of modern government structures. He launched major development programmes to upgrade educational and health facilities in a country plagued with illness, illiteracy and poverty. Omani society is deeply conservative. The effect of Islam, the religion of the majority, is evident in many everyday details, and works as a cohesive and constructive force. Omani society is patriarchal, with men making most of the decisions dominating political, economic, social and family life (UNICEF and MOD 1995).

Although there is a growing involvement of women in political and economic activities and the workforce in general, the overall socio-political complexion remains male-dominated. It should be noted, however, that women are far from powerless, even in such a context; not only have they entered many and varied professions (apart from teaching and service industries) but their domestic position should not be considered universally passive. The advent of universal education has been the key factor underlying the change in women's status and roles in Omani society, although a woman's main role is still generally viewed as domestic (Al-Ghafri 1996). Those changes in perception that have evolved have been steered partly by the government's vision of the roles Omani women should play socially. Women in Oman were among the first in the region to win the rights of candidacy and vote; the first woman minister in the region was appointed in Oman. These measures reflect both the growing

importance of women and the distance they still have to travel. The Omani population is, globally, one of the most youthful, with more than 41% under the age of 15 (Ministry of Development 1997). This has significant implications for the provision of services and education.

This article discusses the role of gender in career choice, career commitment and professional development, on the basis of interview data derived from a research study of female teachers in the Sultanate of Oman. An increasing number of Omani females are entering various careers that were considered unsuitable in the past, including those within the governmental, industrial and service sectors, but teaching continues to be the favoured option. Certainly, family pressure and social traditions are not the only reasons Omani females go into teaching, although they are still powerful. Extrinsic factors, such as immediate placement and attractive work conditions, including the salary and long holidays, are crucial reasons women become teachers in Oman. Overall, the rights women have been granted, rather than gained, to work outside the home, have only added to their workload: women have two demanding jobs, and help from their husbands tends to be either unavailable or limited. One of the results of any social change may be an increase in stress in the medium term for some: in my research, women expressed the feeling of becoming more pressured physically, emotionally and intellectually.

### **Gender: a driving force in career choice**

The issue of gender roles is central to the discussion of careers (Drew and Emerek 1998; Greenhaus and Parasuraman 1999; Stockman et al. 1995; Veenis 1998). Assumed essential differences have been determiners of, and formed an ideological basis for continued role demarcation. Women are often the sole initial carers of their own children, and this can easily determine perceptions of femininity. However, perception is more powerful than reality: globally, and certainly in developing societies, women do more hard work, agriculturally, domestically and industrially, than their male counterparts.

A culture's dominant ideologies have a crucial influence on women's work. How a woman is viewed, what role she is expected to fill and what responsibilities she has, or has been given, are important in determining the extent to which she enjoys career opportunities. In Oman, the strict definition of gender roles has traditionally restricted women's career and, frequently, academic choices. In a society

that places great importance on a woman's traditional role as carer, it is unsurprising that the majority of female teachers teach because it is a 'suitable' career. Omani society, as is the case in most developing countries, gives a specious priority to 'male work', while downgrading equally and often more arduous non-domestic female work. A woman's presence at home is given greater ideological importance, as a way to compensate for, or excuse, the fundamental injustice.

However, while some research suggests that in teaching, gender results in vertical segregation between staff (e.g., Bradley 1989), with males more likely to gain promotion than women, this is not the case in Oman, where state schools are single-sex. There are positives in the Omani model. Single sex educational systems result in less competition at work, which in turn lessens the vertical segregation present in systems, where both genders work in the same place (Bradley 1989).

While the roles Omani women play both domestically and elsewhere have been greatly affected by the provision of universal education, unavailable before 1970, traditional, and not only male attitudes, still restrain women within a maternal role. Gender exerts considerable influence over motives to teach, and later job commitment and possibly job satisfaction. Parents, whenever possible, try to find jobs for daughters that fit in with the dominant domestic pattern. Because teaching is regarded as undemanding and compatible with domesticity, females are encouraged into this profession. The daily work schedules appear convenient, and the holidays are long, allowing a teacher to spend more time with her children. Most women become teachers because of a sense of job compatibility.

The Omani situation bears some resemblance to conditions elsewhere. However, there are distinct particularities to the Omani context, specifically the single sex environment of the Omani school system, the immediate employment of new graduates in teaching because of the high demand for teachers, and the good working conditions and salaries of teachers in Oman.

### **The perception of teaching as a woman's career, and its effect on girls' career choice**

From an early age, the Omani environment orients girls to teaching as the only, or as the most suitable work option, thereby constricting ambitions: *'There are no other fields for women here except teaching. Our parents and family put in our minds that*

*we either become teachers or doctors.’ (Amani); ‘It was the only alternative I had. My family prefers women to be teachers and I never thought of other fields.’ (Zakia).*

The dominant feelings articulated by teachers in this study are ones of frustration and injustice, and although the effect of socialization is powerful, the early exclusion of other employment options can leave a sense of opportunities lost, which may have the effect of damaging teachers’ attitudes to teaching - a career chosen by default. Limited choice earlier on may lead to later pedagogic limitations, as demonstrated by negative effects in the various phases of development. Choice is closely linked to the identification of, and with career goals: if a goal is only such because it has been designated by others, then it is less a goal than a limitation: there is a sense of failure identified by respondents even *before* they started their careers.

Filial obedience, which means that children obey their parents out of a sense of duty and respect, is highly valued in Oman. However, the effects of prolonged exposure to limited choice and the imposition of goals may be wider and deeper than expected, not only in pedagogy, but also on the system of filial obedience itself. Choice is further limited not only by notions of suitability, but also by the respective levels of academic commitment of those careers that are considered suitable. Teaching and medicine may be considered the most suitable, but the longer duration and greater difficulty of medical training, and the significantly more demanding nature of the job, means many females have little real choice.

Doing what others ‘expect’ creates a gap between the individual and society, and the individual and her career ‘choice’. Conforming must create an unusual relationship between the individual who chooses and their choice. It is unlikely that this relationship will be positive or creative.

*Most of the things we do are not because we are convinced of them or a result of deep thinking. We do what others expect us to do. Teaching is one example. Society wants us to be teachers- not in any other job. However, if I thought about it or if I were given the chance to choose I wouldn’t choose teaching.*  
(Bushra)

The majority of those interviewed for my research confessed they had not thought about their suitability for teaching when they chose to enrol in the College of Education: the primary consideration was the appropriateness of the profession for women. Introspection could have negative implications on their pedagogy, their enjoyment and

subsequent commitment to teaching.

Other teachers interviewed suggested that suitability was a very secondary consideration. What these responses indicate is that 'suitability' is not necessarily considered important to career choice. Although some respondents were suited to the profession, the very way in which suitability is considered, in cultural terms, means that this concept tends to be distorted.

### **The attraction of teaching as a women-only work environment**

Omani society, especially within the interior, is deeply conservative. In this social context, people believe in the value, and indeed desirability of sexual segregation, opposing any idea of a mixed workplace; some still believe women should not engage in non-domestic work. However, financial considerations mean Omani men increasingly prefer to marry working women: the best option is to marry a teacher, since the education system balances the equation – extra family income and, at the same time, keeping in line with tradition.

*The school environment doesn't have men. So, there is no mixing with men and even if there is then it is to a minimum level. This was a main reason for me (to join teaching) because the way I was brought up compelled us not to mix with men. (Khulood)*

### **Immediate employability and good working terms as attractions into teaching**

In Oman, the College of Education is the first choice for female students, because teaching is associated with immediate placement in a secure public sector job: in 2002, 28.5% of female applicants to Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) enrolled in the college of education. This fits with the general picture of the Omani economy as a rentier economy, where oil has been a significant distorting factor: the public sector is seen as a place of security and provision by right. It is here that previous definitions of 'suitability' are placed into sharper focus

The demand for teachers as a result of Oman's growing, youthful population provides parents with a reinforcing factor to encourage daughters into teaching. Noora confirms that her family encouraged her to enrol in the college of education because '*...the job is guaranteed after graduation so my efforts have a result instead of sitting at home not finding a job. Also it is a suitable job for women.*' Importantly, these

guarantees come with attractive working conditions. Meera, with hidden regret, says she never wanted to be a teacher; the College of Arts was her first choice, but the guarantee of work was the decisive factor: *'I wanted to study English in the College of Arts but I was told there were no secure jobs for this specialization ... . So, I studied in the College of Education although I didn't want to be a teacher but at least the job was secured.'*

### **Being a female teacher in Oman: effects on commitment**

Not all employees are committed to their jobs. The impression was that many respondents looked at teaching as a job to be done: merely an income source or a mechanical task, worthy of minimal time and effort. Many also voiced a strong wish to change jobs, unhappiness with their career or feelings of indifference to their job. The frequency with which such remarks were made, even by some trainees and novices, invites discussion of the reasons behind such attitudes – such as large class sizes or rigid curricula. Using gender as an analytical lens provides interesting perspectives on this issue.

Many factors interact to make the experiences of these teachers in some ways similar to, and in other ways different from experiences of other teachers in different contexts. Insufficient interest in teaching, lack of support, the absence of an inspirational environment in which to blossom, and society's attitudes to women's careers can all interact to breed a lack of serious career commitment. Safa has been a teacher for only three years, yet already she seems to have reached a plateau in her career. Although she was initially interested, differences between her ideas about teaching and the reality discouraged her.

*A: How do you feel about being a teacher? Do you love teaching?*

*S: I feel indifferent but I will not choose another job.*

*A: In the questionnaire you said that you are 50% happy and 50% unhappy as a teacher. Do you think your feelings will change to be less than 50% happy with teaching?*

*S: No, I think it will stay the same.*

*A: Don't you think that this feeling will exhaust you?*

*S: Not really. It makes no difference. The majority of teachers are like this. There are teachers who hate teaching and wait to complete eight years to get an early retirement.*

*A: Do you think that you will reach this state?*

*S: I don't know. Teaching has become part of my life. I don't think I could stay at home because during the summer I start missing school after just the first month of the holiday. It keeps me busy with something.*

Safa seems to settle her troubled conscience by convincing herself that she is not the only one with such an attitude: she sees herself as probably better, in both a pedagogic and moral sense, than others who 'hate' teaching and are waiting impatiently for early retirement. She feels an indifference – or dislocation – and this feeling, she believes, has no deep, negative impact on her pedagogy. But it must have some effect: this is a woman for whom teaching 'has become part of [her] life', who 'miss[es] school' during holidays, but only because 'it keeps me busy with something'. Safa confessed to having considered leaving, but for financial reasons decided to stay. This suggests a teacher who has adapted to a routine which she finds comforting at a superficial level, but which offers no deeper rewards, a teacher who is simply going through the motions of teaching because it stops her thinking. This attitude may be frequent among female teachers who have found themselves constrained by social and familial circumstances to do something in which they feel little or no interest. This may result in a poorly-developed pedagogy, or one that has little chance of development.

There seems to be a relationship between a teacher's motives to join the teaching profession and her commitment to her career at later stages, although earlier research findings were not consistent in this respect (Farrugia 1986). There may be a link between teachers' career choices and their commitment to the job. Initial career attitudes, or a predisposition to teach, are crucial in the decision to stay in or leave teaching – although attitudes may either be reinforced or transformed through work experience (Yee 1990). My study found a strong association between reasons to join teaching and quitting. Those who joined for socio-cultural or extrinsic reasons were more likely to think of quitting than those who joined for intrinsic motives.

The majority of respondents became teachers for socio-cultural reasons, such as teaching being a convenient career for women. Many openly said they had not considered whether teaching was the right job: most began work thinking it an easy job. Very few expressed a vocation, or thought teaching was enjoyable. Choosing teaching because of its 'moral mission' was never mentioned as a career motive. Drifting into teaching for non-vocational reasons is not an ideal precondition for commitment, but if the woman feels she has been backed into a career and thus deprived of an adequate spectrum of choice, regret and psychological dislocation are inevitable.

My research has shown that teachers who were positively motivated initially tend to show a sustained interest despite, in most cases, being in what they said was a discouraging school environment. Unmotivated teachers tend to lose interest, are less involved in their careers, and are unwilling to invest more effort.

The feelings that a teacher has about her profession are, I found, related to the reasons she remains a teacher. Teachers staying on for financial reasons or for lack of other options tend to have more negative feelings. Those rare individuals who become teachers because of vocational commitment show more interest, enthusiasm and long-term involvement. Their work is more than just a job – they are positive in the face of difficulties. Five interviewee teachers had initially been interested in a teaching career, and showed different attitudes and perceptions. They were aware that being interested, and maintaining that interest, was the main reason they enjoyed teaching, and the reason they were relatively committed. This might be significant when recruiting teachers, and also points to the role pre-service training could play in fostering positive, professional attitudes. I found, however, that current training courses did not have an influence on teachers' initial attitudes.

### **Marriage, motherhood and commitment to teaching**

Although female education has increased the average age of marriage for women in Oman, most get married immediately after graduation, and opt for a child immediately. Moreover, while female education and work are increasingly valued in Omani society, an education or a career does not displace the traditional roles. My research has shown how single teachers were more interested in their pedagogic roles than married colleagues with children: the responsibility of additional roles has a negative effect on a woman's career.

Women experience a turning point in their personal lives as well as their working lives with the arrival of children, and this parental status may divide women. The demands of children have a great influence over women's career development, but this influence may, in career terms, be negative.

Working Omani women are, in this sense, no different from working women everywhere. Despite teaching being chosen by women mainly because it fits with the roles of wife and/or mother, the amount of time and effort put into their roles as teachers changes, and is expected to change once a teacher starts a family. Single and married



teachers alike talked about how having a family can change a woman's priorities and result in less career involvement. Single teachers were expecting to move teaching to a secondary position once they had their own families, and accepted that they would inevitably lose interest in their job. Colleagues' influence was apparent here: enthusiasm is a delicate commodity, and may well be easily undermined, or as in this case diverted, by the views or practices of others. There was little belief among respondents that career and family can somehow be balanced.

*A. You are single now. Do you think things will change when you become a wife and/or a mother?*

*M. Yes, because I see my colleagues. Married ones with children have no time to think how to develop their teaching. I saw this with my sisters who are both teachers as well. I used to like the way my eldest sister used to carefully and creatively prepare her lessons. Now it is routine to her. I don't want to end up this way, but I don't know what to do. (Meera)*

One aspect of the social constraints discovered among respondents is the lack of any deep reflective criticism of their present and future situation when it comes to 'the inevitable'. There is evidence that, despite having the opportunity to pursue a career, Omani women still view their main role as familial, and this may cause an interesting situation: women feel trapped between government policies that encourage more female participation in public life and the traditional social attitudes. My sample comes exclusively from the post-1970 generation who benefited from education; there is a considerable educational and psychological gap between them and their parents, who are often under-educated. These parents remain the guardians of a deep-rooted belief system, and represent a polar opposite to the policies of government. In such circumstances it may not be unfair to suggest that women develop a certain amount of socio-cultural schizophrenia. In the end this situation probably resolves itself in the easiest solution for the woman, and a desire to avoid a cultural paradox in which the woman finds herself trapped.

I found that married teachers with children talked about having neither enough time nor energy for both roles. New mothers, especially, felt guilty because they had to leave their children with someone else when they went to work. Nannies become an embodiment of the guilt career mothers feel: and a day care centre or nursery is more likely to revive feelings of personal inadequacy.

Guilt, compounded by financial and other dilemmas, is common among working mothers in many contexts: 'At work [the working mother] feels guilty about not being a good enough mother, and not spending more time with her children; because she has children she also suffers guilt at not working hard enough in her job. In both quarters working women feel compromised and inadequate.' (Figs 1994:78).

New mothers, predictably, show more concern for the welfare of their young children; teachers with older children have established a comfortable routine of childcare and with it a comfortable philosophy to offset or displace the guilt. Also, as children grow and go to school, the problems of care are reduced.

Working women in Oman, and in other of the Gulf States, may be luckier than working women in other parts of the developing world with regard to childcare. The mechanics of childcare are not particularly problematic because cheap labour is readily available from countries in the Asian sub-continent. Although the availability of such labour can make the lives of working mothers easier, the use of expatriate labour brings its own concerns. On a macro scale, expatriate labour only magnifies the negative effects of relying on others. On a micro scale, the domestic helpers employed are, in many cases, from poorly educated groups with different cultural, religious and social backgrounds: factors which are likely to exacerbate maternal guilt, and worsen any sense of critical social pressures. Many nannies are unqualified, and the quality of care children receive in the absence of parents may be very poor. Alternatives, in the form of support services for working women such as properly inspected nurseries or kindergartens, are very few, relatively expensive and poorly regulated. Issues of qualification and adequacy have not yet been addressed in legislation, but it seems inevitable that concerns which currently exist on a domestic front will, eventually, even in Oman, come into the political arena.

### **Conclusion**

Gender has emerged as a decisive underlying factor in women's choice of a teaching career in Oman: social influences related to gender are linked with the perceived compatibility of teaching with women's familial roles, and the notion of the 'convenience' of the career. In this article, I have also illustrated the effects of initial motives to teach on the development of job commitment: those motivated by intrinsic reasons showed more commitment than those motivated by cultural or extrinsic factors. However, the relationship between initial motives and commitment to the job

cannot be described as linear; it is, rather, cyclical. Teachers' practical experiences may alter their initial attitudes to and perceptions of teaching.

Rather than acting as a positive change, opening the workplace to women in Oman could be viewed as placing them in a difficult, and indeed, paradoxical situation. Women will experience increased levels of stress as they try to cope with not only a proliferation of roles, but also a proliferation of expectations – from others as well as from themselves. Women who enter teaching without feeling it is anything except a practical choice, or who are coerced in some way, will feel that the demands of being a woman, a wife, a mother and a teacher are difficult to reconcile.

Concepts of suitability, as well as the way in which working time is organised, create among women the feeling of being trapped, whether they have a job or not. The problem may be that the provision of women's rights needs to be engineered by women, which would allow the development of a better support for evolving female roles. The granting of appropriate rights is a beginning not a completion; work structures and the ideologies surrounding them need to be adjusted, to ease the pressures on working women.

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