

# ECONOMICA

## WOMEN *and the* GLOBAL ECONOMY

### **PODCAST: Politically Powerless, Economically Powerful: A Contradiction?: A Conversation with the Saudi Businesswoman Rasha Hifzi**

In this podcast, originally recorded for I.M.O.W.'s *Women, Power and Politics* exhibition, businesswoman and women's rights activist Rasha Hifzi speaks about this contradiction and Saudi women's struggle for political equality.

**HOST:** Welcome to the International Museum of Women and this monthly podcast for the exhibition, *Women, Power and Politics*. Each month, we'll be talking to remarkable leaders from around the globe.

This month's topic: "Her Vote. Her Voice?"

**RASHA HIFZI:** *Even if there was no chance for us to have candidates, at least we have to have the right to elect people. And to have this right, we need to educate women.*

**HOST:** Businesswoman and women's rights activist Rasha Hifzi grew up and lives in a part of the world earmarked as one of the few remaining countries where women still do not have the right to vote for their representatives in government: Saudi Arabia.

When it comes to women's rights, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is often held as the worst-case scenario. Images of women in long, black *abayas*, which reveal only their eyes, are often juxtaposed with tales of restrictions:

Women aren't allowed to be in a room alone with a man who isn't their father, husband or brother. Women are not allowed to drive, although Saudi officials have hinted recently that such a ban could be lifted, in large part because women are playing increasing roles in the workforce. Still, only about one in twenty Saudi women work outside the home.

The picture isn't all bleak, though. According to Women's eNews, Saudi women have the right to own property, transact business, go to school and be supported by their husbands, while maintaining their separate bank accounts.

In fact, according to a report by the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Saudi women own nearly 70 percent of bank accounts in the Kingdom, with deposits of

roughly a quarter of a billion dollars. There are also 34,000 trade records registered under the names of Saudi women, who own 20 percent of private companies in the Kingdom.

Rasha Hifzi is one of these women business owners — she runs a marketing company. She's also been a social activist since the age of 15, and credits that, in part, to the city where she grew up — Jedda. Jedda is the most liberal of all Saudi Arabian cities, perhaps because it's the portal for all pilgrimage, where people from all over the world are welcome.

*Women, Power and Politics* curator Masum Momaya sat down with Rasha Hifzi recently in Marrakech, Morocco, to talk about the status of women's rights and the ways women exercise their power in Saudi Arabia. She asked Rasha which social issues have been the most important to her.

**RASHA:** I worked in the relief area, fundraising for a project for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and Turkey, Somalia. And then there was a stage also when I used to teach new Muslims, Islam, and I used to teach also comparative religion where we find commonalities between all religion, Christianity and Judaism and Islam. Lately, I worked also with the international Muslim organization for Women and Family where our role was to...I was responsible for the information research center and we used to analyze all the documents of the United Nations and the gender equality papers and we were trying to see how we can emphasize different NGOs to participate and work in alliance with Saudi Arabia and implementing all the human rights factors in these agendas.

**MOMAYA:** And if it's possible to characterize or generalize the status of women in Saudi Arabia, how would you describe that?

**RASHA:** Well, I'm really happy that you ask this question because I think the Western world, they have this kind of stereotype image about women in Saudi Arabia. You know, Saudi Arabia is really a developed country. I mean, it's not only about being rich but we developed in 50 years, so when we talk about women issues we are talking also about educational issues, we're talking about human rights issues so it's not only about women.

There were phases in Saudi Arabia, and we went from one phase to another and in the meantime with King Abdullah as he issued many laws for women, we believe that a lot of changes had happened. For the first time ever we had now women board members in Chamber of Commerce, and we have also women members in the Parliament. And now we are lobbying to have women members in the municipality.

Actually now if you go anywhere in Saudi Arabia, any company, any organization you will find women everywhere. Of course it took them time to have woman in these positions because this needs mobilization, it needs training, it needs education. And

maybe two weeks ago, they assigned one woman to be in our National Committee for Sports.

**MOMAYA:** I'm looking at you sitting here as a young businesswoman, as an owner of a business. Is that very typical or very unusual?

**RASHA:** In the meantime, in the last couple of years, it's not unusual. Actually it was not unusual for the last 20 years, but it was not legitimate, it was not obvious. Of course there were so many rules and procedures we were having obstacles in having official licenses for women to have their businesses and companies. But now, the last couple of years, you find a lot of woman started their own business. Actually, this year I was marketing the Jeddah Economic Forum, and we were happy that most of our suppliers were women companies, and it's an achievement.

**MOMAYA:** I know one of the issues that you're very passionate about is having women involved in civic participation and women's political participation. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

**RASHA:** I just need to clarify one thing. Us pushing women to have a role in the political agenda or in the civic issues, it's not only about that we need the women to be there, mostly that we believe that if the woman is sharing the man in putting the agenda for the political issues or the civic issues, it will help families. It will help women because you know that you can't let just one part of the community decide for all the other parts of the community.

And in the meantime we're trying to spread awareness about the importance of elections and voting. Hopefully we'll have the municipality elections in couple more years and we want women to be enthusiastic about this even if there was no chance for us to have candidates, at least we have to have the right to elect people. And to have this right, we need to educate women and spread awareness about the importance of election because it will help us to implement all the laws, all the procedures, all the projects we wanted to be implemented in our province and region.

**MOMAYA:** So is it true that Saudi women do not have the official right to vote yet and that is something that is still being worked on?

**RASHA:** Regarding the municipality elections, but if we were talking about the other elections, like the Chamber of Commerce, no, we have the right to vote, the elections happen every four years. The last elections happen two years ago, we had four board members. They were elected by women, and they are women actually. And they had beautiful campaigns.

Now for the municipality election, we were promised that in the next turn we will have a lot of women to vote and to be candidates. Now, perhaps the previous elections were

the first municipality election in Saudi Arabia. It's not like the Chamber of Commerce, so perhaps that was the excuse for not having the chance for women to vote. For logistic matters and procedures and voting zones. But hopefully, we're working from now to lobby for women to participate in the elections. But the most important thing, if we want the government to help us in letting women be an icon in this and to participate in the elections, we need to have the demand from the civic society and from the women themselves because if they are careless and they don't believe in elections, nobody will vote, we'll have no candidates.

**MOMAYA:** And is that the case? Do most women want to participate and have a voice or is that something that still needs to be fostered in this society in terms of encouraging participation and voting and educating people about what that process actually is?

**RASHA:** Yeah, I think we have a long way to go because we have a lack of awareness about this. It's not only with women, among youth too, but for women it's a special case because if you want to women to have more seats in the municipality, to present women issues, to present family issues also and bring it to the municipality, we need to have the demand, and demand will come if you spread education and awareness about the importance of election and about how to proceed, how to set programs, how to evaluate the program and follow up with the consequences of these elections.

**MOMAYA:** And do you see...is there a difference amongst older women vs. younger women in terms of their desire to participate?

**RASHA:** No, actually. I see the desire there but we have the lack of know-how. Sometimes we have a lack of interest because as I told you, it's a first time experience, people sometimes, they don't have faith in the experience. They don't believe something will happen. So I think we need to spread the faith with this experience and awareness and education.

**MOMAYA:** And would you yourself consider running in an election? For any form of office?

**RASHA:** Well, you know, I never thought of it. But yeah, why not? I mean, I never thought of this because I feel it's a big responsibility and my hands are full right now. But if the time comes when I feel that maybe there's a demand and it's a responsibility that I have take, I will do it.

**MOMAYA:** And do you see a difference also amongst girls? Young girls who will access the internet and organize through the internet and spread the word about different issues and ideas. And I wonder if you see differences in the generation that's just coming up that are in their teens, teenagers.

**RASHA:** Yeah, of course, I mean technology network, internet, all these kinds of websites, Facebook and whatever, they really helped a lot to spread the word and technology helped Saudi girls to link with international youth and to be more open to more experiences and more knowledge. And I see as I told you the desire, and they are very enthusiastic, very interested. We need just to have a certain trend in how to orient them in the right way.

**MOMAYA:** Do you want to say anything about the role that religion does or does not play in sort of women's inclination towards or desire or even the state's [Saudi Arabia's] inclusion of women in the political process?

**RASHA:** The role of religion was not only, has an enforcement toward women. Actually there was one ideology controlling the whole society, the whole organizations. We are in very liberating phase now and you see different ideologies, different minds and different religious points of view. And as a Muslim country, as the center of the Islamic area we can separate this from religion, actually. What's so amazing right now that a lot of the religion interpretation changing, and we are discovering more and more about religion and how it's really these kinds of concepts in religion. It will help us to develop the development in our country.

Like if we talk for example about election, you know that in the history there were a lot of women elected and they had seats, and they were teachers, they were scholars who used to teach men and all these concepts, they were not in consideration in the last years. Mostly I can say that it's not only about religious point of view, the last few years, Saudi Arabia like most of the other countries went with tradition and traditional barriers, you know, more than religious barriers.

**MOMAYA:** Is there anything else that you would like to add?

**RASHA:** I would like to add that I would hope that most people would come to Saudi Arabia, conduct research about Saudi women, and see things in real life because perhaps I would say some people, they are blaming the Western society, some people are blaming Saudi Arabia or the Arab society, some people blaming the media but a lot of key elements are effecting our image in the Western society. Saudi Arabia is not about terrorism. Saudi Arabia is not about oil only. Saudi Arabia is a very rich country with cultures and ideologies and I really, really hope that more organizations, more people would come and see how it is like there.

**MOMAYA:** Thank you very much.

**RASHA:** Thank you. Thank you.

**HOST:** You've been listening to Saudi businesswoman and activist Rasha Hifzi in conversation with Masum Momaya, curator of Women Power and Politics, at the International Museum of Women in San Francisco.

After their interview, Masum wanted to talk a bit more on some of the specifics of women voting and running for election in Saudi Arabia. She joins us again.

**MOMAYA:** I only had a really short time to speak with Rasha in Morocco, we were actually in-between meetings, so we only had the space of 10 to 15 minutes to be able to talk. But I think it's especially important to clarify the context around Saudi Arabia given how much it is misrepresented and how little is understood about it. So there is a little bit more to the picture that I think will help our listeners to understand what is going on in Saudi Arabia.

It's been a really remarkable step for women to be able to stand for election in Chambers of Commerce, but there are some cultural conventions that really stand in the way of women being able to exercise their full power within those contexts. For example, even though women are allowed to stand for election in Chambers of Commerce, it's still likely that men will not vote for them.

A young fashion-designing business owner was interviewed and she said: "It may be difficult for men to consider giving their votes to a woman candidate. Members will vote for people they trust, but unfortunately women haven't been given a chance to show how good leaders they can be due to regulatory and cultural restrictions."

Theoretically, even though women can stand as candidates for Chamber of Commerce elections they may not get elected because people vote for people that they are familiar with, and women aren't the candidates that businesspeople or general members of society are familiar with.

We heard in the introduction that women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to mingle with men that are not related to them. So they are not allowed to speak with or have conversations with men who are not their husbands, or their brothers or their fathers. For example, women have to have male agents in order to conduct business in government circles. So, a women can't actually negotiate a business deal as the business owner herself, she has to send a man in her place because of the cultural conventions.

What happens is that they are not seen as the person who is leading or the person that is doing the business, they're still seen as the person behind the scenes. And when it come to running for election and being in the public eye, people don't know who they are, because they haven't seen them. They've seen the men that act as proxies for them in leadership positions and management positions. So that makes it difficult to present yourself and get your message out there as an individual person other than on a poster or through a commercial or an ad on TV, versus being able to interface with people one

to one, and we know that that's what gets people elected that personal connection. And this is particularly important for women who in some ways are already hidden—by the abaya.

So it's interesting because it's a Catch-22, in the sense that women are encouraged to run and take these leadership roles but the cultural conventions stand as they did, and haven't been changed. And I think for those of us who are looking at this situation from outside the country it's particularly hard. I don't think you can ever make a call that someone else is empowered. We don't have the right to make that judgment. But at the same time, looking at that, we can't help but wonder whether women really will be able to make significant political gains as long as these cultural conventions don't change.

It's also interesting because a lot of the media that is coming out of Saudi Arabia shows a lot of empowered women who are being interviewed, who are running economic forums, who are there speaking to audiences, speaking on television as part of demonstrating their leadership, and speaking from their experiences running businesses. So, again, I think it's really hard to say they don't feel empowered.

Certainly when I met Rasha in Morocco, she was one of the most empowered, well-spoken, articulate, clear agents that I had ever met. And it certainly broke down my stereotypes. I really did not expect that. Because the images of the women in Saudi Arabia that we see in the United States are definitely women covered in black, who aren't allowed to go anywhere, who aren't allowed to drive, who aren't allowed to make decisions for themselves, and I really came to understand that those images were false in a number of ways, in my conversation with Rasha.

I think it's also interesting to look at Saudi Arabia at this particular moment in its own history and its position in the Middle East. And I think that there's been a very clear directive from the Saudi Arabian government towards economic development and to really growing the country's economy and its power, not only in the region, but also in the world. And I think it is very much recognized that women are a part of that process, and they have much to contribute to that process. And why not engage all the citizens and grow the country's economy and make it stronger? And women are successful business owners.

So I think it's really interesting that this political right has an economic impetus behind it. And I think feminist scholars are really watching it to see if this is a gain that is done in the spirit of gender equality, or is done in the spirit of economic incentive. Are women allowed to be business leaders because the country wants more money and it wants to grow its economy? Or, are women allowed to be business leaders because men and women are equal and they should be allowed to do the same kinds of things and hold the same kinds of positions that men have? And I don't know whether that question has been answered yet.

I think a lot of it is in the hands of women in Saudi Arabia, themselves, in terms of what they decide to do with the rights that they are increasingly gaining, and the force that they already are and that they are becoming, in terms of their own awareness, their own influence, their own assets, their own resources, all of those things.

**HOST:** Masum Momaya is curator for Women, Power and Politics: a groundbreaking multi-media, multi-lingual online exhibition that showcases inspiring stories of women claiming and exercising their power. It connects women from around the world to transform their communities for the better.

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