

# Educate Women, Educate the Ummah

By **DR HAIFA JAMAL ALLAIL**

PRESIDENT, EFFAT UNIVERSITY



**Haifa Jamal Allail received a PhD in Public Policy from the University of Southern California and was a visiting scholar at John F. Kennedy School of Government. She was then appointed the first Dean of Girls' Campus in King Abdulaziz University and in 1998 joined Effat University where she began her tenure as President from 2008. She is one of the winners of 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize**

**2005 and the winner of the Distinguished Arabian Woman Award in 2005. A respected author and researcher, she is well known for her expertise in privatisation, and female empowerment.**

**T**he role of women in Makkah during the times of our Prophet ﷺ should serve as an inspiration to modern day Saudi Arabia. Women make up roughly half of Saudi Arabia's population, making them as vital to the success of Saudi society and the Saudi economy as their male counterparts. The education and empowerment of Saudi women is indispensable to the Kingdom's future. Without realising Saudi women's full potential for creativity, innovation and growth, the Kingdom will not realise its own potential for peace and prosperity.

The role of women in Saudi Arabia has been evolving over the past half-century and continues to do so. Sixty years ago, the education of women either focused on their roles as mothers or was considered a luxurious adjunct that was secondary to what society deemed a woman's domestic priorities. Queen Effat Al Thunayan, the wife of the late King Faisal Al Saud, began to chip away at these tired tenets regarding the role of women and extolled the benefits of empowering women, educating them and redefining the role of Saudi females in the Kingdom.

Queen Effat Al-Thunayan enjoyed the support of King Faisal, who was an enthusiastic backer of education for Saudi women. Although her vision of women was considered unconventional at the time, she succeeded in establishing Dar Al-Hanan School, the first model school for girls in Saudi Arabia, in 1955. Dar Al-Hanan took the first steps toward educating women, opening its doors with an initial enrolment of 30 students.

In 1970, King Saud University was established to educate both men and women. By 2017, 40 more universities opened around the Kingdom. Queen Effat remained a strong proponent and very visible

supporter of educating women. In 1998, two years before her death, the Queen requested a license for Effat University, the first private non-profit university exclusively for women.

Over time, more and more female students enrolled in Saudi schools, but it took a very long time for the education of women to become an accepted norm in Saudi society. Today, however, more than 3 million Saudi women are enrolled in school, representing more than 50 per cent of all Saudis attending school. (In 2014, Saudi universities had enrolled 747,000 female students, accounting for 51% of all students in Saudi universities and 56 per cent of university graduates annually.)

Queen Effat had envisioned Effat University as a leading educational institution for women who sought to enter the workforce and perform outstandingly in a global environment, bringing prestige and respect to their country. As the original pioneer in higher education for women, Effat University offered courses in engineering, architecture, entrepreneurship and operation & information management. By 2017, enrolment had grown to 2,500 students.

This growth was in line with Queen Effat's pioneering vision for the university, a vision that included a university known for its excellence in instruction and its adherence to the values underlying *iqra*, a word that appears in the Holy Quran and refers to the search for knowledge and enlightenment.

Today, more and more attention is being paid to higher education in Saudi Arabia, and colleges and universities are now regarded as intellectual hubs where tomorrow's leaders are being trained. Through the meeting of great minds and the honest and open exchange of ideas, our universities will allow us to break through traditional barriers and build better, more tolerant and more capable societies.

With the promulgation of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the fruits of Queen Effat's efforts to establish an education system that caters to women as well as men have come to fruition. One of Vision 2030's major tenets is to further open Saudi society and the Saudi workplace to the valuable participation of women.

Saudi women still have a long way to go, but their contributions to the business, political and social worlds are becoming more and more remarkable in 21st-century Saudi Arabia. Saudi women today are more than ever ready and capable to serve effectively and creatively in both the private and public sectors. And, in light of the growing number of local businesses that are the fruits of female entrepreneurship, women have clearly become acutely aware of their potential for making great contributions to society and the world at large.