

## Introduction

From global reports, cultural modernity and gender equality are now clearly acknowledged as fundamental pillars in the development and growth of a society. Nonetheless, the roles and functions assigned to women are based on the nature of their rights and duties conferred upon them by a particular society. To find their own way in society, women should be enabled to use, satisfy, and maintain a high level of skills (Werhane et al., 2007). Women's skills will undoubtedly help them penetrate and participate in the labour market and engage in community development equally with men without discrimination. According to a United Nation's (2010) report, when women are empowered, women participate more fully in economic life across all its dimensions and, by doing so, are involved in building stronger economies and helping achieve the development and sustainability of a nation while simultaneously improving the lives of women, men, families and communities. The transformation taking place in today's world of economic, social, cultural and technological advancements has led communities to reconsider the shape, the size and the gender of its "manpower." It is indisputable that women must be integrated into the process of community development and be given the opportunity to practice their social roles effectively for a modern knowledge-age society to develop. Nonetheless, Bilimoria and Piderit (2007) have indicated that the roles and responsibilities of women within the family structure have often constrained their careers.

In Oman, the Ministry of Manpower (2015) has forecast that by 2020 the participation rate of women in the labour market of the total workforce would be about 12% and the proportion of Omanis in the public sector would be about 95% and in the private sector would be about 75% in the same year. In 1988, there was a policy introduced by the Omani government called Omanization. This policy served to replace expatriates with qualified or competent Omanis. It was a way to increase the number of Omani citizens working in government and private sectors in Oman. This Omanization of the workforce will further enhance the participation of women in economic activities and provide a clearer vision for those who wish to enter the world of self-employment through the establishment of projects and investments. The continued evolution of the Omani labour market in the civil service sector and the private sector has provided a growing number of job opportunities for Omani women.

However, the total number of Omani women workers in these sectors grew from 55,368 employees in 2006 to 73,197 employees in 2008, constituting a total increase in employment opportunities for women of 17,829 and representing an average of 5,943 new jobs added yearly. The annual growth rate of employment opportunities for Omani women in these sectors has reached 9.8%. In part, these figures reflect the fact that increasing the participation of Omani women in economic activity is a direct result of the increase in female students enrolled in basic education, along with an increase in the number of women having a Certificate of General Education Diploma as well as those who are attending technical colleges in higher education. The statistical data on the educational level of the Omani workers for 2008 indicate a considerable discrepancy in the distribution of workers between the civil service (governmental sector) and the private sector for the level of education, according to a comparison of women's employment, jobs and occupations. The data noted that 84.1% of Omani workers in the private sector only have a general education diploma, while 60% of Omani employees in the civil service have a college degree. This disparity demonstrates that professional women work in the civil service in areas that are mainly concentrated in the education and health sectors, which require specialized ability and are highly skilled fields of work.

Conversely, the majority of wage earners in the private sector perform work needing limited skills with low wages. The advancement of women in civil service positions and in the

private sector should pave the way for them to ultimately occupy leadership positions as well as become capable of assuming greater responsibilities at the political institution level, such as on the Councils of State and the distinguished *Shura* Council (Ministry of Civil Service 2008). The below table (Table 1) shows the latest statistics of Omani women's labour force participation.

**Table 1: Percentage of Omani Women at Labor Force**

**Insert Table 1 here**

Since 1970, the starting date of the Omani Renaissance, remarkable quantitative and qualitative progress has been in all aspects of life in the Sultanate of Oman. However, the role of women in building a modern Oman must be investigated to see what impacts women have made in nation and community building. Unfortunately, the significant increase in female enrolment in the educational institutions neither guarantees nor has led directly to the empowerment of Omani women. Nevertheless, Omani women are making progress in society and in their penetration into the workforce, and reports have indicated the progress of women in economic participation and in the political sphere. Thus, women participation in the Omani workforce, the provision of equal opportunities and wages as well as encouragement are good foundations for the realisation of talent of the Omani women and social justice practices in the Omani community.

### **Women's Empowerment: Social Development and Labour Force**

Several scholars have studied women and their advancement in Oman. Taking a sample of 150 women, Varghese (2011) measured women's empowerment with the results showing that women enjoy good decision-making ability; they are better in household management and economic decisions compared to social empowerment; and they concurrently understand their rights and duties involved therein. **A research conducted by Rassekh (2004) on educational reform with the reference to women status revealed that, female students significantly outnumbered their male counterparts in several academic disciplines, including science. The same research also revealed that, some educated women held positions of authority in the government and business.**

Approximately 30% of all the civil servants are women, and 59% of them are Omani citizens. In the public sector, although women are entitled to equal pay for equal work, not all private sector employers observe such regulations, most probably due to male chauvinistic attitudes and cultural norms. A Ministry of Education statistical report in 2010 showed a dramatic increase in female registration in government schools in Oman. This report clearly demonstrates the considerable quantitative growth of the female presence in the field of education. The number of female students increased from 165,975 in 1990 to 261,249 in 2009, while the number of female teachers increased from 6,788 in 1990 to 27,801 in 2009, and the number of female school administrators increased from 456 in 1990 to 4,916 in 2009.

Nonetheless, in terms of participation in the labour force at large, the Omani labour force structure remains heavily male oriented. Because men are considered to be the main breadwinners of the family, they are given priority over women with respect to job opportunities. One reason is that many employers believe that women will leave employment once they are married or have children, and, hence, are reluctant to employ them. Furthermore, the women who are hired normally receive less training, promotional opportunities, and, generally, earn less than men in similar jobs (Al-Lamky, 2009). For Omani women, family matters come before those of careers outside the home. Al Hasani's (2015) study on women's empowerment in Oman indicates that women can only join the labour market after receiving

permission from their families. Traditionally, Omani society prefers that women play the roles of wife and mother instead of having career roles. Research has shown that Omani women feel more respected and appreciated when playing the role of wife and mother compared to role of a career woman. Nonetheless, Al Hasani reported that Omani women feel mobilized and had a sense of power and leadership when they are employed. Regardless, Omani families and traditions serve as the touchstone for women's employment. Some families are flexible and some are not, and this conservatism could lead to less participation in the labour force for women (Al Hasani, 2015).

### **Leadership and Political Involvement**

Many women in Oman are determined to improve their existence, pushing hard for their voices to be heard and knocking on doors for improvement. In 1997, Sultan Qaboos issued a decree that women could join the *Majlis Al-Shura* (a Consultative Council), and two women were duly elected to the Council. Another development in the participation of the Omani women in public office was in 2003 when Sultan Qaboos appointed the first female minister. In 2003, only two women were elected to parliament sitting among 81 male colleagues. In the same year, 9 of 59 elected Council members were women (Khan, 2005). In November 2007, 14 women were appointed to the 70-member *Majlis Ad-Dawlah* (a State Council), which is an advisory government body (Al-Talei & Fatany, 2009). Women were also appointed to ministerial positions. To further their cause, Sultan Qaboos has placed women's issues as one of the top items on his agenda and has assigned 14 women academicians, former ministry undersecretaries and former members of the OCC to the State Council, an advisory government organisation. Four women were appointed at the ministerial level in Oman – three to oversee higher education, tourism and social development, and one as head of the General Handicrafts Commission. In other prominent political positions, an Omani woman was appointed as Minister of Education of Education in 2004 and by 2009 two women served as ambassadors: one in the Netherlands and another in the United States. In the same year, women in Oman also occupied 5% of leadership positions and represented 18% of the labour force (Al-Talei & Fatany, 2009).

Women's development has continued to grow in Oman through the support of His Majesty. Another landmark decision occurred when the equality of men and women was formalized in 2008. "In an important development last year, Omani women were granted equal rights to men, free government land, and equal testimony weight in court, according to the new Evidence Law. A new law to combat human trafficking, affecting women disproportionately, was also enacted" (Al-Talei & Fatany, 2009, p.1).

Despite such progress, converting empowerment and progress into significant political power has faced obstacles. For example, although females dominate the educational sector and outnumber the male population in colleges and universities, seizing economic power remains a long way away. Additionally, women in Oman seem to be inactive in the agricultural economy and oasis settlement, which has inhibited them from grabbing social and political power in traditional society. Moreover, a significant disadvantage exists for women who want to participate in the business arena, especially in the field of entrepreneurship. Their lack of entrepreneurial skills might be attributable to the lack of role models in entrepreneurship, awareness, networking, marriage, and cultural norms of censorship. These factors can or have prevented women from inventing or venturing into business and gaining more power (Khan, 2005).

Notwithstanding the progress women have made in Oman, Al-Talei and Fatany (2009) found signs of dissatisfaction among women, a sense of neglect, and a feeling of discouragement in politics. That is because Omani women believe that they are powerless and have little control in the current political arena, which is subject to unclear criteria, even given

the appointments of Sultan Qaboos. To improve their lot, advocates of greater participation for women are asking for more involvement in government positions, appointments to the Consultative Council, and participation in public positions and in the labour proportionate to the gender ratio in the national census. If these demands are granted and women are allowed to become involved and participate in the elections and gain positions equal to men, these changes will be significant signs of empowerment and ensuring women's rights in Oman.

Indeed, now than ever before, seeing women in the top administrative levels is acceptable. In line with this, the General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs has played a significant role in the socioeconomic development in Oman in enhancing the status and role of women. The Directorate was established in 1985, under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, to enhance the development, participation and role of the Omani women as equal partners in society.

### **Culture and Traditions Limit Freedom and Equality**

To further upgrade women's status, His Majesty appointed Dr Sharifah bint Khaflan al Yahyaiyah in 2004 as Social Development Minister for sustainable development in the social sectors to help develop equality. Since 2009, Oman has celebrated Omani Women's Day to highlight the contributions of women and to advocate for further improvements in their roles. In addition, Omani women have made great achievements, as highlighted by Al Yahyaiyah, through the Omani Women's Campaign. This campaign was created to ensure direct interaction with society through events, competitions, media, marketing and the Internet. In addition, the campaign was designed to help build women's capacities and confidence as well as increase their participation in developing their communities (Khan, 2010). According to Khan, the campaign also aimed at educating citizens about expanding the horizons of woman's involvement in the development and education of their society and raising public awareness about the available opportunities for the Omani woman. However, some research findings indicate that a need still exists to change the traditional attitudes of males, including their chauvinistic bias and stereotyped perceptions towards the status and roles of women in society. For example, Freedom House reported in 2010 that, despite improvements and changes in social issues, Oman had a long way to go before gender equality was achieved (Freedom House, 2015). Freedom House further reported that, in Oman, civil liberty was at stake and that freedom of association and expression were among the major challenges that the women's movement is currently facing (Mayton, 2010).

Thus, regardless of recent changes, the existing cultural values and the inherent die-hard traditions will further delay women from participation in all aspects of life. The literature has reported the status of Omani women in terms of social participation, development, education, politics involvement and labour force. The literature has noted a rapid development of women and their involvement in society. Their lot has improved tremendously with the help of Sultan Qaboos and the open-mindedness of some families. But, despite the high level of female enrolment in high institutions and active participation in aspects of social development, culture and tradition still hold them back from becoming equal with men. This current research seeks to bridge gaps in knowledge about the position of Omani women in society by investigating to what extent they perceive that they have been empowered to participate in the social and community development in Oman. In addition, this study aims to examine the perceptions of university females regarding women's development and where they stand with respect to culture and tradition. Last, but not the least, this study proposes a women's developmental model and indicators that could illuminate areas to examine in uplifting the standards and status of women in Omani society. Hence, the study can illustrate factors that women believe hinder their development and lack of participation in certain fields in the community such as business

and entrepreneurship and, by doing so, lead to improvement and better practices. No research in Oman exists seeking the perceptions of female university students towards their participation in the community, education, politics, employment, family and women's empowerment.

### **Methodology**

This study utilizes a quantitative design by means of a survey to determine the relationship between the endogenous variable (women's empowerment) and the exogenous variable (community development) as well as examining the direct effect. Two models were used (Measurement Model and Path Model) to explain these relationships and the causality using a Structural Equation Model (SEM). The population of this study comprised female students from three of the four most popular universities in Oman: Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), Nizwa University and Dhofar University. SQU is the only national university in Oman, founded in 1986 and is considered to be a major higher institution that provides higher education (Sultan Qaboos University, 2012). The University of Nizwa was established in 2002 and commenced with the full status of university in 2004 as a non-profit university for the whole Sultanate (Nizwa University website, n.d.). Dhofar University is a private and non-profit university similar to Nizwa established in 2004 (Dhofar University website, 2009). Unfortunately, no samples could be taken from the University of Sohar because of the demonstrations held Sohar in 2011 during which the university was closed temporarily.

**Insert Table 2 here**

### **Sampling Design**

The study sample comprised only female students with a sample size of 429 (see table 2) and data was collected through a self-administered questionnaire that was administered between 2011 and 2013. This study uses University female students, the rationale for this is female students coming from Oman are considered to be the new generation for the Omani future. It is practical to explore their opinions about how society will perceive them and what their future looks like after their graduation. The study opted not to explore the views of female Omani working women because it is believed that they are already part of the system and culture; thus they might prefer the existing system or social status as they have already adapted to the current social system. They might also opt not to give concrete answers compared to students who are more likely to be fresh and open-minded. Taking the above factors into account, since this research looks into future and proposes change, it is more relevant to explore the opinions of the new generation of women or females regarding the current women social status and the future. The study will also consider their ideas to propose change to Omani social practices as well as help their voices be heard for their future social involvement and improvement.

The samples were selected using a stratified sampling technique by dividing the respondents' regions and their university colleges into different strata and taking female students from each of the above-mentioned regions and colleges proportionately. The questionnaires were distributed face to face by the researchers and research assistants. More than 600 questionnaires were distributed with the sense of targeting more female students to participate in the survey and, eventually, the response rate was more than 70%. These students represented almost all Omani regions and cities, including those who came from Dhofar, Muscat, Al Dahra, Al-Dakhilia, Al-Sharqia, South Al-Batinah, North Al-Batinah, Al-Burimi, Musandam, Al-Woosta, Nizwa and Alesmarat to study at Sultan Qaboos University, Nizwa University and Dhofar University. The selection of the samples was based on a population ratio in which female students from certain regions tend to be dominant in terms of population.

This study used a self-developed instrument comprising 44 questions focusing on two areas: 1) women's empowerment, and 2) community development. The women's empowerment factor was measured using three dimensions: educational progress and opportunity, social status and empowerment. Community development was measured using three dimensions: husband's support, encouragement and participation.

### **Demographics**

With respect to age, 122 of the female students were less than 20 years of age while 307 were 20 and above. In terms of the colleges or specializations of participants, samples were taken from all faculties: Art and Social Sciences faculty, Engineering, Nursing, Commerce, Sciences, Agriculture, Education, Medicine and from the Law. For data collection, informed consent was sought and received from the authorities at the three universities to conduct the research and to use their students and informed consent was gathered from the female student themselves before the distribution of questionnaires.

### **Findings**

The research comprised two main variables: 1) the empowerment of women and 2) community development. The empowerment of women comprised three sub-scales or factors: 1) social status, 2) educational opportunity and 3) equality in employment, while community development also comprised three sub-scales or factors: 1) husband's support, 2) encouragement and 3) participation. Women's empowerment was considered to be an exogenous (independent variable) in this study, and community development was considered to be an endogenous (dependent variable). To examine the relationship between covariances, Confirmatory Factor Analysis was applied by looking at the factor loadings, and Path Analysis was employed to determine the direct-effect of the exogenous variables on the endogenous.

### **Measurement Model**

The model was applied in this study to investigate which factors contributed significantly to women's empowerment and community development in Oman. The model was also designed to help determine the best factors or indicators overall. Twenty-six unfitted items were **deleted** due to the cross loading of items and low factor loading by using Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Those that remained were the best representatives of their respective constructs.

Figure 1 presents the Fit Indices of the Measurement Model for the Empowerment of Women, Educational Progress and Participation in Community Development in Oman. The results of the analysis of the overall fit of the model were very good. The data revealed that all the good-fit-indices were above ( $> 0.90$ ).  $CMIN/df = 1.78$ , Chi square = 308.17,  $GFI > .943$ ,  $AGFI = 0.924$ ,  $CFI > 0.910$  and  $RMR$  below  $0.05 > .009$  as well as  $RMSEA > 0.041$ . This shows that the data fit the model.

## Insert Figure 1 here

*Figure 1: The measurement model*

### ***Indicators: Women's Empowerment***

#### *Social Status*

Item SS9, which was "Women can look after themselves outside the home", was the best indicator for the SOCIAL STATUS factor with the highest loading and reliability ( $R^2 = .27$ ,  $y = .52$ ), while SS5, which was "Educated women are well respected in Omani society", and SS8, which was "Women can continue their career when they get married", were both the lowest indicators for SOCIAL STATUS ( $R^2 = .12$ ,  $y = .35$ ).

#### *Educational Opportunity*

Item EO3, which was "Families encourage girls to participate in the development of society in Oman", was the best indicator for EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY ( $R^2 = .61$ ,  $y = .78$ ), while Item EO1, which was "Women see the importance of taking part in community development" was the lowest for EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY ( $R^2 = .35$ ,  $y = .59$ ).

#### *Equality in Employment*

Item EE1, which was "There is gender discrimination in employment in the government sector in Oman", was the best indicator for EQUALITY IN EMPLOYMENT ( $R^2 = .46$ ,  $y = .68$ ) while Item EE6, which was "Male principals are the majority", was the lowest for EQUALITY IN EMPLOYMENT ( $R^2 = .08$ ,  $y = .28$ ).

### ***Community Development***

#### *Husband's Support*

Item HS7, which was "Males believe women's place is the home" was the best indicator for HUSBAND'S SUPPORT with the highest loading and reliability ( $R^2 = .32$ ,  $y = .56$ ), while HS8, which was "Husbands prefer their wives to stay at home to take care of their children", was the lowest for HUSBAND'S SUPPORT ( $R^2 = .14$ ,  $y = .38$ ).

#### *Encouragement*

Item EN4, which was "Males in Oman motivate women to work together in developing their community", was the best indicator for ENCOURAGEMENT ( $R^2 = .44$ ,  $y = .67$ ), while Item EN2, which was "Government encourages women to participate in the society development in Oman", was the lowest ( $R^2 = .11$ ,  $y = .33$ ) for ENCOURAGEMENT.

#### *Participation*

Item P11, which was "Women play important roles in the development of the Omani economy", was the best indicator for the PARTICIPATION with the highest loading and reliability ( $R^2 = .38$ ,  $y = .62$ ), while item P8, which was "Women contribute less to the Omani society compared to males", was the lowest ( $R^2 = .16$ ,  $y = .40$ ) for PARTICIPATION.



### ***Predicting best factor for Women's Empowerment & Community Development***

Overall, EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY was the leading factor and indicator associated with respondents' perceptions of women's empowerment and the community development in Oman, followed by EQUALITY IN EMPLOYMENT.

For all results, see Table 3 below.

#### **Insert Table 3 here**

In this study, path analysis was used to show if any direct effect of women's empowerment and community development existed in the data set for Oman. Path Analysis helps to identify the causal effect of the exogenous variable on the endogenous variable. Therefore, the method was applied to determine the empowerment of women of the community and whether their husbands had something to do with their community participation and development.

Figure 3 shows the path coefficient analysis of women's empowerment in Oman and community development. The results show a very strong direct effective of women's empowerment on community development in Oman. Thus, for the Omani community to develop, surveyed respondents believed that women's empowerment must be taken seriously as part of the daily lifestyle of the community. In addition, women's educational opportunities, which must have a cohesive status as well as reputation in society, is undeniably necessary for community growth. Moreover, some subtle discriminations and obvious inequalities of treatment exist between males and females in certain areas of employment, which must be critically addressed and appropriately changed for the sake of community development.

#### **Insert figure 2 here**

*Figure 2: Path Coefficient Analysis: Direct Effect of Women's Empowerment and Community Development in Oman.*

Furthermore, the support of husbands seems to be at a low level in the Omani community. Although the study found that, while female respondents believed that some husbands supported their wives for education and employment, the self-interest of males whereby they encouraged their wives to work for the sake of financial assistance could be a grudging source of that encouragement. Husbands sometimes restrain their wives from either working or studying when they feel that they are financially capable of supporting their wives and family. In this situation, husbands want their wives stay at home to care for their children. However, this mentality does not work very well in a modernizing society. Although perhaps serving the purposes and interests of males, this mindset is not beneficial for the development of society at large and the use of the women's untapped talents and resources for community development as a whole.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study have shown that positive relationships exist between social support and encouragement. In the Omani context, when respondents felt socially supported, they become more courageous and their self-esteem increases. The results also indicate that, when women are educated, they feel better respected as they can independently plan to improve their educational standards, that they continue their careers after getting married and that they can become just as good leaders as men. Study has shown that encouragement of women by the



government and families to participate actively and constructively in the development of society is crucial in the creation of a modern nation. Unfortunately, this scenario may not be applicable in Arab countries in which the illiteracy of women remains high compared to males.

A positive relationship exists between social status and participation in community development. The respondents surveyed believe that women can play important roles in economic development and contribute to a stable political atmosphere. A higher status in society and the encouragement to continue their education and careers can help Omani women significantly increase their contributions and participation in community development. This current study supports the findings of Krause (2009) who reported that the rate of women's employment in the public sector in Oman had increased. However, despite several advances such as increased employment, the contribution of women remains less than that of males when it comes to leadership and power.

A positive relationship was found between social status and husband's support. However, major contradictions were present. Female respondents reported that on the one hand their husband's sometimes supported and encouraged their wives working, although on the other hand, those husbands would actually prefer that their wives remained at home, caring for their children. Most likely that this phenomenon is closely linked with the financial situation of the families and existing traditions. Economically speaking, women can support and increase family income. In fact, educated women often can get better paid jobs than either their brothers or husbands. However, when no financial need exists for their wives or sisters to work, the respondents believed that men would prefer them to stay home. The principles that men prefer women to stay at home or that a woman's place is in the home taking care of children while the man's place is at work is common in Muslim countries.

One critical issue in the conundrum is the social image of a man in society, particularly among his friends and family. Image is very important, often causing traditionally inspired males to strive to maintain the image of the "ideal man" across the Arab world. In relationship to this, Badran (2010) reported that, traditionally, women in many Arab countries are considered subordinate to men. (See also, Elamin and Omair, 2010 and Shockley, 2016). This gap aligns with Al-Lamky (2009) who commented that a need exists to increase public awareness about social justice and equality. Thus, more concerted efforts must be made to change the ever-present negative attitudes of the males towards women in the Arab society at large, both at home and abroad.

A lack of a relationship was found between social status and equality. This indicates that, according to the participants, gender-based discrimination still exists in Omani society. Although government efforts to bridge the gap at the governmental level have been somewhat successful, gender-based inequality remains prevalent at the level of society at large and with respect to employment. Progress in education can be noted by the increasing number of women enrolling in all higher educational institutions when compared to the past. However, although women in Oman today have more freedom to choose a university education, they are restricted from enrolling in some areas of specialization (Al Gharaibeh, 2011).

With respect to social status and participation, respondents reported that a positive relationship existed between encouragement and participation. The government's determination, family encouragement and support for women to work and participate in building a modern Omani society have resulted in promoting their participation in community development. The growing involvement of Omani women in social, economic and political institutions in Oman is quite noticeable and very encouraging.

A positive relationship was also found to exist between a husband's support and participation. In exploring husband's support, the results seem to indicate that, while men believe the woman's place is at home, they simultaneously like their wives to work, particularly for financial reasons. From an economic viewpoint, respondents believed that males preferred

women to work, but from a social point of view, they believe that a woman's place is in the home. This kind of situation is reported in most Arab countries in which women are facing social customs and traditional norms. Unfortunately, this conflict of interest can aggravate already existing gender discrimination.

A positive relationship was found between husband's support and encouragement. Respondents believed that because their husbands liked their wives to work and supported their wives in achieving their dreams, they also encouraged their wives to participate in community development. However, an argument can be made that women are only be encouraged to participate in the community when their husbands "give the green light" as Arab women are, in general, powerless, respectful and obedient when it comes to family traditions, husbands, culture and society.

Results show no relationship between equality and educational opportunity. Clearly, respondents believed that regardless of educational freedom and progress, equality is yet to be achieved. Women may be given more opportunities to decide for themselves, but men are still considered superior to women. A negative relationship was found between equality and husband's support. This result once again emphasizes the fact that women feel discriminated against in employment opportunities in both government and private sectors. The results showed a negative relationship between encouragement and equality. This indicates that government efforts, family inspirations and motivation of women to work have not yet resulted in gender equality. Consequently, gender discrimination is still very much a difficult problem that needs to be seriously dealt with at its very core.

### **Research Implications**

This research has demonstrated the importance of several factors with respect to women's equality, such as the government's empowerment of women and the freedom given to women in gaining unrestricted access to education. With this freedom, given in 1970, women have utilized the opportunity, especially in the field of education, in which the enrolment rate of female students in higher institutions of learning is triple that of the males. With these educational and social scenarios, Omani society can be portrayed as becoming more of an open society.

Nevertheless, the exploitation of one gender over another can still exist in situations in which husbands prefer their wives to work when their financial support is necessary, but when the situation allows, husbands prefer their wives to stay at home. Such ignores the fact that these same women have great potential to contribute effectively towards the development of the state and create progress in various fields of economic activities and social upliftment.

Lamentable is the fact that the huge enrolment of women in higher institutions and government initiatives is not being transformed into power and leadership for women. As previously alluded to, public awareness is needed to showcase these gaps and to highlight that Omani women need to be given a chance to realize their full potential, knowledge and skills. Easier access to education and a higher enrolment in higher education should pave way for women social and political empowerment , it could also be seen as a sign of women development in Oman. Relative to leadership in Oman, in all types of organizations, such as in the educational sector and business, the roles of women remain limited. Attaining leadership positions in government and social sectors in Oman and other Arab countries often have insurmountable obstacles. Although the women's movement has begun, concrete activities are taking place, and some feminization based on a modern theory of development in Arab countries has occurred, visualizing a woman as a national leader, prime minister or perhaps a ruling queen is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine.

In other political arenas, such as advisory councils and ministries, women remain low in number in Oman. Even the gainful employment of women in the public sector and their dominance in the educational sphere have not helped in bridging the inequality gap in the community between the males and the women in the labour force. This is not a major surprise, for as in global society, the marginalisation of women is commonly seen in third-world countries, such as in Africa, Asia, Latin America and throughout Arab nations, due to their strongly conservative nature and rigid mind-sets and typical adherence to culture and tradition.

In light of this, several questions must be asked. When will gender equality take place? What are the results of the empowerment of women? When will the feminization movement be effective? What is the essence of the efforts of governments when women cannot be seen as leaders and when Arab men believe that the position of women is at home and perceive a female president or country leader as an abomination?

The findings of this current study will help other nations see women's abilities and make use of them for economic growth and nation development. This lesson should be learned by developing countries from developed countries in which males and females work and compete together to build their nations. These developed countries are advanced economically because they made use of all human capital, including both males and females. They are developed socially because they believe woman play huge roles and because they involve women in social activities without side-lining them.

This research is timely especially in the context of the occurrence of the Arab spring and in the current situation where Arabs have become refugees all around the world leaving women and children most vulnerable. This research contributes to public awareness in Oman on uplifting the standard of women in society by proposing a model that suggests areas for further improvement for women development in Oman. This model could be used as a framework or a guide on social equality practices. This research advocates for social change and this kind of research is highly needed in Oman and other Arab countries to instil social justice and equality. Social change is not a day job, it happens gradually. It requires every member of society's participation regardless of their gender, age, race and religion. A society cannot develop, prosper or be balanced when parts of the society members are alienated and deprived from their civil right and participation.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has limitations, including those of sampling. The sample may be biased because Sultan Qaboos University has the largest student population compared to the other universities. Moreover, this research did not include working women or women not attending university. One recommendation for further research on the empowerment of women in Oman is using working women in the government or private sectors as part of the sample. In addition, another limitation is that the researchers did not survey students from private universities and other Omani women studying abroad. Lastly, caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings as the study was limited to female university students and thus male students did not have a chance to participate in the study.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has investigated if any significant relationship existed between women's empowerment and community development in the Sultanate of Oman. It examined the direct-effect of women's employment on community development as well as their contributions to Omani society. Realizing the importance of women's empowerment, the Omani government has made great efforts to increase women's participation in the workforce and to improve the social conditions of women in society at large. Investigating the points of view of female university students, this paper shows that empowerment is a prerequisite for women's

participation in community development and that education is a key factor in empowering women. According to the university female students who participated in this study, gender discrimination and inequality in employment opportunities remain, especially in the private sector. Regardless of the progress made, based on this research findings, respondents believe that Omani women are encountering silent discrimination in the labour force in terms of appointments as leaders or managers, as well as in training and promotion. This can be seen in the lack of female university vice chancellors, presidents and deans in Omani universities. Respondents believed that Omani men prefer their bosses to be males rather than females. Omani society is a conservative one in which people stick to their traditions and sociocultural stereotypes remain wherein men believe that a woman's place is at home. Moreover, women still face gender inequality and discrimination in other ways as well, especially in gaining access to the Internet and technology.

Additionally, little encouragement exists for women to pursue their postgraduate studies, and some families do not allow their female members to study abroad. The research contributes to an understanding of Omani society in terms how university women or girls feel about their status and development while showing how women have been viewed in the past and present and projecting how they should be viewed in the future. Moreover, the findings show some challenges facing women in Oman in terms of marginalisation and gender inequality, especially in a country in which culture and tradition are strongly upheld. From a more positive perspective, however, the findings could help in identifying what must occur to bring men and women together in building a nation without offending culture or eradicating tradition. In the future, reinforcement of the women's empowerment must occur, through the acknowledgement of women's capabilities, changing of the perceptions towards working, and seeing women's participation in the community activities as sources of modernity and country grow. A future can be envisioned in which universities, faculties and departments will be led by women in Oman. A future can also be envisaged in which women increase their political sagacity and audacity and participation. Both old and new cultural values could work together without relinquishing one for another, especially from a modern perspective. Islam does not disallow modernization, rather, Islam is a religion of modernization that can evolve to suit every century and era. The issues of women's development and empowerment are bubbling to the surface.

Today, Arab women are gaining full access to education, even more than men, and some are being permitted to study abroad. Some have appointed as ministers, ambassadors as well as council. The status of Arab women is improving and developing rapidly compared to the past, but room for improvement exists, especially when comparing Arab women to those in developed or developing nations. In this respect, all concerned parties should consider the following recommendations based on these research findings in order to surmount obstacles and foster the empowerment of women:

- Based on the findings, this study recommends a considerable increment in female access to education and the freedom to enrol in their preferred specialization without pressure or exclusion. This will enable women in Oman to participate significantly in community development and economic growth.
- Common practice in Oman is that women are not allowed to enrol in some courses and specialise in some majors, but this has to be changed. Opportunity and freedom must be given to women to enrol and specialise in any course or major they prefer.
- The support and efforts to increase the intake rates of women in the labour force, generally, and in the private sector, in particular, should be continued. This can only be achieved through education and training and creating more job opportunities so that women can effectively contribute to the country's development process.

- Increased public awareness of gender discrimination must be undertaken. Society should be educated on women's rights and needs and learn to respect women as equally capable citizens. Issues of inequality must be seriously addressed for the sake of the ongoing progress of community development.
- Women's leadership roles should be seriously encouraged, and society must believe in their capabilities and have faith as well as assurance that they can be effective leaders for the nation.
- The stereotypical concept that women's place is in the home and that their duties are taking care of children must be changed immediately. Development of media programmes highlighting Arab women's achievements in the past and in today's life can be a big help in this regard.
- In the future, longitudinal research is needed to show where Omani women stand in terms of community development, how this changes over time and terms of economic and social development.
- This research recommends future studies to examine the impact of tradition and culture on women's development and advancement in Oman and other Arab countries.

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