

THE Saudi

saudi gazette.com.sa

GAZETTE

MONDAY • NOVEMBER 28, 2005 • SHAWWAL 26, 1426

HOW WOMEN'S COLLEGES EXCEL

By Hesham Khadawardi

RECENTLY, a high-level delegation from the United Nations – including Mrs. Nancie Annan, the wife of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan – visited Effat College in Jeddah. Welcomed by college dean Dr. Haifa Jamal Al-Lail and a number of highly educated Saudi women such as Thoraya Obaid, executive director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), the visitors spent ample time at the college speaking to the faculty, staff and students about important world issues and developments. The visit was a unique occasion for the college members to interact with and benefit from the vast experience and background of an intellectual crowd that had first-hand knowledge on decisions and other matters concerning global and local issues.

Similarly, on the previous day, Ms. Elizabeth Cheney, the daughter of US Vice President Dick Cheney, in the company of high-level US government officials, visited Effat College. Again, the college members enjoyed and greatly benefited from listening to and interacting with such exceptional guests.

Such visits are invaluable opportunities for students to mature socially, politically and economically, and they have become a very frequent happening in the short history of women-run colleges — Effat and Dar-Al-Hekma — in Jeddah. In addition to speakers representing the West and its concerns, the

colleges have also invited disparate speakers representing different schools of thought. For instance, Ali Al-Hasan, a famous Islamic preacher, was speaking at Effat college some time last Ramadan.

These invaluable visits reflect how diligent and active these colleges are in offering their students and members great opportunities to grow beyond the narrow walls of textbooks and classrooms. More importantly, such visits reflect the remarkable competence of these women-run colleges, which have become vivid examples of the capacity and capability of women to contribute to social betterment not only in the academic field but also to the society as a whole.

The great beneficiary of such a development is, of course, Saudi society, which ironically is now succumbing to the same social category — females who have been marginalized and neglected for decades. Women's current contribution to society branches out from the current disposition of the Saudi government and Saudi society towards social change and correction. An important motivation for change stems from recognition of socially marginalized groups not only as an existing element of society, but rather as an active one.

Women, the largest marginalized group in Saudi society, are deserting their long-lived passive role and becoming an essential influence on their society. This new trend is articulated in women's involvement in the academic field. Although women have been always part of the academia since establishment of women's sections in all Saudi univer-

sities, they have never felt a sense of belonging to the academic institution. Their ultimate job was to teach the prescribed textbooks and administer the already agreed-upon policies, regardless of whether these policies agreed or disagreed with their context and needs. Today, however, women are academically empowered through independent academic institutions such as Effat and Dar Al-Hekma colleges. In the independent offices and corridors of these colleges, women are keenly discovering and experimenting with their social circumstances and opportunities, and evidently surpassing the achievements of the male-run universities that have a far longer history.

Although Effat and Dar Al-Hikma colleges are only few miles away from King Abdul Aziz University, the latter has failed to invite or attract any world-class, distinguished speakers as those we frequently see in the women-run colleges.

A more exuberant example of such female superiority is the current dean of Effat College, Dr. Haifa Jamal Al-Lail. Although she has taught and functioned as KAAU dean for many years, her social recognition and achievement have not gone beyond casual remembrance by those girls who had sat in her classes. After five years of running and leading Effat College, however, Jamal Al-Lail has been nominated for the Nobel Prize.

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