

# **Smarter Mothers, Healthy Children, Smaller Families**

A Look at the Impact of Women's Education on Family Planning Decisions in the  
Sultanate of Oman

**Kerala Hise, SIT Oman, Fall 2009**



Is there a single, perfect, cure-all policy that a government can enact to achieve sustained development? This is a question international organizations and individual leaders ask themselves every day. There will always be 'less-developed' nations, this is a reality of having 'developed' nations, but there is no reason that humanity should allow there to be 'under-developed' nations, not when we have at hand the tools and knowledge to enact immediate, sweeping changes now. However, because different people, different groups feel that their idea or proposal is of the utmost importance, that change is often never realized. Often, too much value is placed on sweeping economic policy and wide scale market reorganization as opposed to fundamental human centered change. Funds are squandered, failures encountered and hopes lost. There is no magic bullet for development, this much has been clear from the start. The road to development is long and hard, much harder for some, and the influences of domestic policy and international hurdles all combine for a complicated question with an equally convoluted answer. But in every nation there are some preconditions for lasting change and persistent growth that are simple to achieve, require very little cultural change to enact and are embraced the world over as having immediate and effective results.

The importance of educating women and providing basic healthcare for all citizens have long been touted as necessary steps on the road to development; additionally, reducing family size is often a keystone of policy both governments and of non-governmental organizations. However, the changes taking place in Oman have been much more a result of that increased access to education for women and universal healthcare than of the provision of contraceptives. Thus, to observe the development track that the Sultanate of Oman has taken and the remarkable results that have been achieved in only a few generations, it is encouraging when considering the

possibilities for development policy outside of Oman. The availability of contraceptives alone would not induce the widespread transformations that are occurring in the Sultanate; rather it is the dramatic change in the social perspective on family size that has led to the success of the birth spacing programs. To consider this in a broader perspective then, one can find many applications to development programs all over the world. The most important of the lessons to be learned from the progress of Oman is that family planning programs alone cannot be successful without the social impetus for change that comes when families realize that their children will all live to survive past the age of five, and parents, especially mothers, come to value education for their children as a result of their own education, and that it is policy like this, as opposed to market focused policy, that creates the sustained progress that Oman is currently experiencing.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development declared that education of girls and women is the “*single most important component a nation can invest in to improve its health.*”<sup>1</sup> The education of females improves the health of women and their families and the survival rate of their children, all of which increases the overall health of a nation, and its productivity. The education of women contributes in a very significant and direct way to the development of a nation. Education of females has been central to Oman’s development goals since His Majesty Sultan Qaboos rose to the throne in 1970; verification of this knowledge by an international body only reinforced the nation and Sultan Qaboos’ commitment to expanding

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<sup>1</sup> Al Riyami, Aysa, Mustafa Afifi, and Ruth M. Marby. "Women's Autonomy, Education and Employment in Oman and Their Influence on Contraceptive Use," *Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 12, No. 23 (May, 2004): pp. 144-154

education for women. In addition to a commitment to educating females, the Sultan has always made healthcare a primary focus of his domestic policies, recognizing that the impacts of a healthy population extend far beyond such things as improved life expectancy and lower cost of maintaining life to the state. In all of these areas, Oman has proved tremendously successful, seeing infant mortality rates plummet, life expectancy skyrocket, and fertility rates continue to drop year after year. In addition, per capita GDP has exploded<sup>2</sup>, Oman’s universal healthcare system has been touted around the world as a model of efficiency, and nearly 95% of school age children complete primary school.

Graph

1



Two areas most impacted by His Majesty’s plans for Oman are the healthcare sector and education. At the end of his father’s rule, there were only three schools in operation in the

<sup>2</sup> From \$935 in 1950 to \$7,537 (GDP per capita by Purchasing Power Parities, International Dollars, 1990 prices. Graph 1 demonstrates these changes; it ends in 2005. [www.Gapminder.org](http://www.Gapminder.org).

Sultanate, with less than 1000 students enrolled.<sup>3</sup> Since the Sultan came to power, basic education in Oman has expanded dramatically, and with well over one thousand schools operating, education is now compulsory for all children through grade twelve. The number of students enrolled in school in Oman has increased by over 600% between 1970 and 2001 as a result of the “clear-sighted and perspicacious vision of His Majesty”<sup>4</sup>. The progress made in basic education in the past 30 years has been extraordinary, especially with regards to the percentage of students that are female now. Previously, education in Oman was available exclusively for boys at Qu’ranic schools. Now, nearly half of the students in government schools are female. In 2002, less than 1% of women over the age of 60 had received more than 12 years of education (the level for men was a mere 4.4%), but for women in their 20s, nearly 50% had completed high school<sup>5</sup>.

As more girls attend school, the number of women at the university level has risen accordingly and now women make up over half of the student body at Sultan Qaboos University, the country’s largest university<sup>6</sup>. For many of these girls, the availability of a free university education is one of the main reasons they are able to attend school. Many families still do not value higher education for their daughters and would be reluctant to send their young women to school if it required paying the full amount, so Sultan Qaboos University and the other colleges that offer a higher education at no or reduced cost provide great incentive to these families and young women. It is His Majesty’s wish that Omani women are able to take full advantage of all the opportunities that a modern Oman can offer and that they participate fully in the growth of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.omani.info/education.htm#foreword>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.omani.info/education.htm#foreword>

<sup>5</sup> Al Riyami, et al.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.squ.edu.om/tabid/5012/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

their country. The Sultan speaks of women as the other “half of Oman’s potential” and this encouragement from the top has only increased the push for wider access to education for females<sup>7</sup>.

In addition to the Sultan’s calls to continue to improve education, he has pushed many changes in healthcare in the nation as well. Before 1970 there were no more 100 people employed in the health sector in Oman, largely a result of the previous Sultan’s neglect of the country. However, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has made healthcare a focus of his development plans since the beginning, and Oman has seen astounding improvement in this area: the country now boasts over 2,500 doctors, and hospitals in every region<sup>8</sup>.

These improvements in healthcare have had a major influence on the size of Omani families, as both fertility rates and infant mortality rates have seen huge changes in the past thirty years. For the first ten years after Sultan Qaboos came to power, the fertility rate remained at the 1950 level of 7.2, but in that same period of time (1970- 1980) the infant mortality rate dropped from 126 deaths per 1,000 live births to 73, a decline of almost 50%. Only after 1980 did the fertility rate begin to drop, but by 1990 it had only reached 6.3. Within 5 years, however, the number was down to 5.1, and began to drop significantly each year thereafter; by 2006 the fertility rate in Oman had reached 2.95 and infant mortality and dropped to 10 deaths per 1,000 live births.<sup>9</sup>

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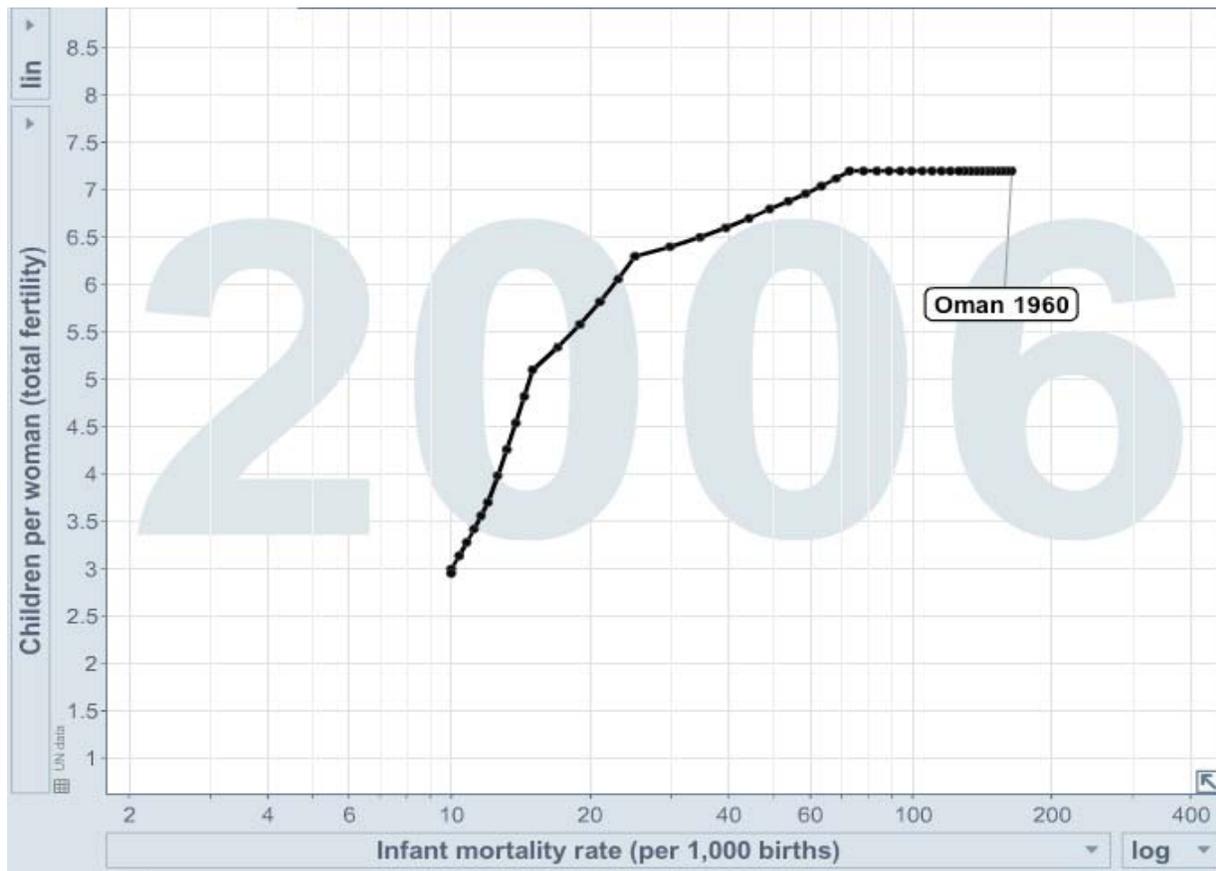
<sup>7</sup> <http://www.omanet.om/english/social/dev2.asp?cat=hist>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.omanet.om/english/social/dev4.asp?cat=hist>

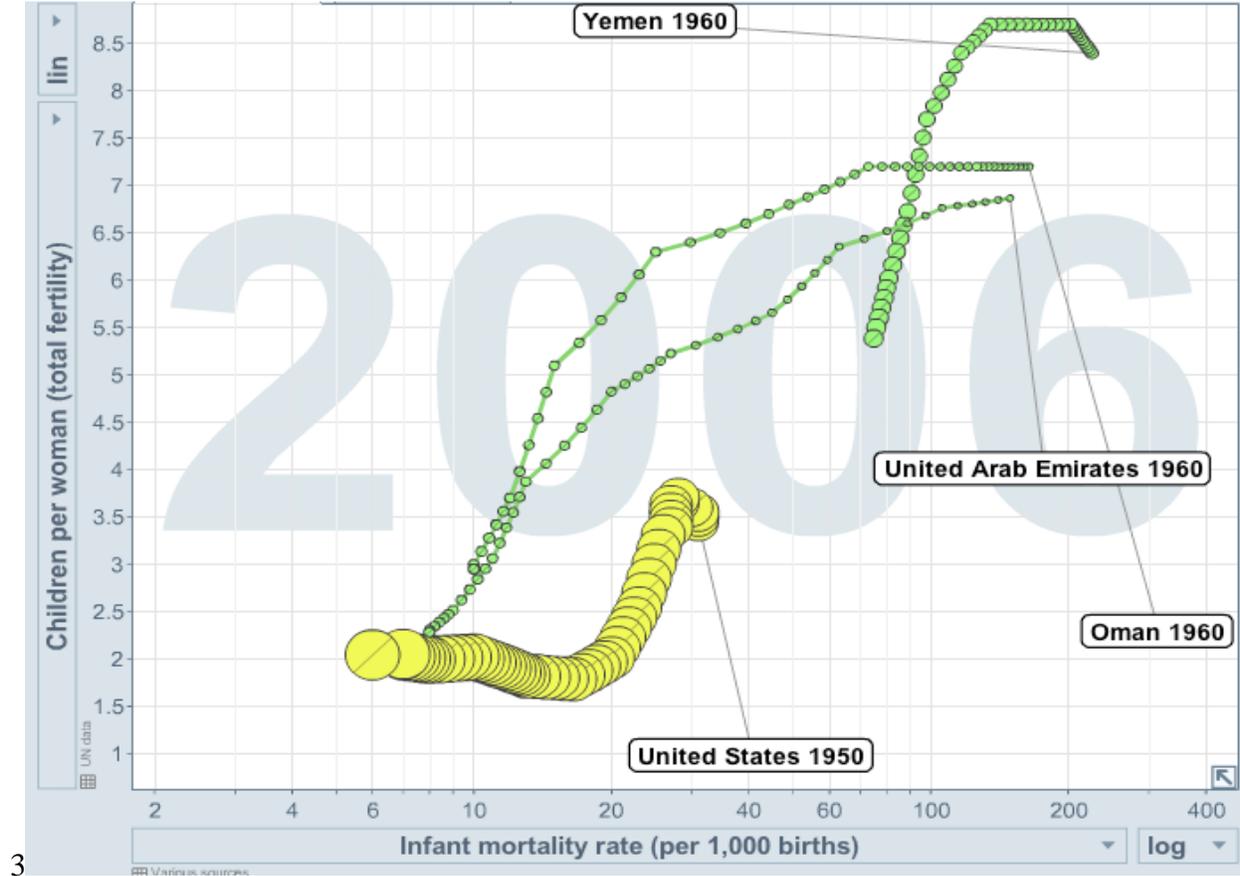
<sup>9</sup> GapMinder

Graph 2 compares fertility and infant mortality rates against one another and provides a very clear picture of these changes taking place; the graph begins in 1960 and ends in 2006. It is also worthwhile to compare the changes in Oman to the progress of other countries in the region, though for the sake of comparison, the United States is included as well as two other Gulf nations. In Graph 3, the different sizes of the dots represent relative population, while the colors represent region. An important point to take from this graph are the similar trend that Oman and the United Arab Emirates are following, though the UAE is still a bit ahead of Oman. Additionally, the rapid progress Oman has made in 50 years demonstrates that it may soon be on par with the United States in these aspects of development.

Graph 2



## Graph



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In 1994 the Omani government began its free contraceptive program, providing modern contraceptives free of charge to married couples at all government run clinics and hospitals. Prior to this, modern contraceptives had been available at only a limited number of privately operated clinics in the Muscat area<sup>10</sup>. Earlier that year the Sultan had declared that birth control, or birth spacing, was a concept inline with both the ambitions and traditions of Oman and was to be encouraged for the sake of future generations. While unmet need (the number of women who wish to use birth control but are unable to) is still at 25%, the number of women using birth control has increased markedly over the past decade; “Ever-use of modern contraceptive methods increased [in 1990, 1995, and 2000] from 16.3% to 35.3% to 50.3% and current use

<sup>10</sup> Al Riyami, et all

increased from 8.6% to 23.7% and 31.7%.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, their research revealed that unmet need decreased significantly with education and paid employment.

“Education has been shown to be more susceptible to improvement through policy intervention than more deeply rooted cultural conventions regarding family size”<sup>12</sup> and thus it is more effective to pursue reduced fertility rates through the channels of education. Al Riyami and her colleagues determined as well that improved education also contributed directly to a woman’s autonomy, which in turn meant that women were able to stand up to their husbands more and exercise their rights in familial decision making more, such as determining the number of children to have.

Thus, there are two explanations for the dramatic changes in fertility rates seen in the early 1990s:

- The first is that in 1994 the Omani government began to offer free birth control to married couples at all the state-run clinics.
- Secondly, by 1990 the first generation of Omani women that were able to receive a complete education and attend university had reached marrying age and were beginning their families.

The availability of free contraceptives and information about them, as well as an emerging generation of well-educated females, created a great demand for these services, both of which combined to make the early 1990s a huge turning point for women and families Oman.

Yet, though it is a universally agreed upon fact that increased education among women will lead

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<sup>11</sup> Al Riyami, et al

<sup>12</sup> Al Riyami, et al

to lower birth rates, beyond that there is little research into what it is exactly about education that leads women to make those decisions that lead to fewer, but healthier and better educated, children, hence this study to determine what it is about education to lead women to take advantage of the free contraceptive program provided by the government.

## METHODS

The purpose of this small-scale study was to begin to investigate how increased education impacts decisions about reproduction and child rearing. In order to discover more about these factors, interviews were conducted with 15 women in the Omani cities of Muscat and Salalah. These were semi-structured interviews in casual settings. The majority in Salalah took place on the campus of Dhofar University; some with students and others with recent graduates that worked at the university (some of whom were continuing their education simultaneously). Additional interviews in Salalah were conducted with non-students including a young woman that just had her first child, and her younger sister who attends a teaching college in Salalah. A few interviews were conducted with older women in Salalah, both for their own stories as well as the observations they were able to provide on the changes taking place in Oman. In Muscat, five interviews were conducted with female members of different homestay families, not all of which attended university, some of whom were married, a few with children, and some working.

The target demographics for these interviews were as follows:

- University-aged women, both enrolled and not enrolled, married and unmarried, with or without children
- Recently university graduated women that were working, both married and unmarried, with or without children<sup>13</sup>

## RESULTS

The interviews that were conducted were designed to shed more light on the issue of how these two changes, the availability of free contraceptives and a growing population of educated women, came to have such an immediate and lasting impact on family size in Oman. The central point here is that while the provision of free contraceptives by the government no doubt encouraged birth spacing throughout the Sultanate, it is impossible that we would have seen the dramatic results witnessed in the same short time span had it not been for the fact that the implementation of the birth spacing program dovetailed with the emergence of a new demographic: the university-educated young woman. The most important conclusion to be taken from this study is that it is this new mindset regarding education and health that leads women to take advantage of the birth control methods provided by the government. There are a number of factors that lead to this mindset, from the physical restraints as a result of continuing education, to the personal value placed upon education, to the constraints on a family with two working parents.

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<sup>13</sup> As state, some interviews were conducted with women outside these demographics for the purpose of gathering more background information as well as adding generational insight on the changes taking place in Oman.

One of the most remarkable changes that has been brought about by the increasing education of women is the growing desire of these women to pursue a career or further their education to a degree previously unknown in the Sultanate. All of the young women interviewed wanted to marry and have a family at some point, but quite a few of them said that that would only happen after they got a chance to live their life first. Ana, a 23-year old student at Dhofar University working on her master's says that she enjoys being a longtime student, "maybe I will get married after I do what I want, but I feel that getting married would prevent me from doing that... from being free." She wants to be able to travel, to get a good job and she did not see this as being a strong possibility if she were married. Most of the other women agreed; a university student in Muscat says that, "education is the reason. As an educated girl in Oman, we need more time to live our own life, to work and achieve our ambitions... I always think about continuing my studies, I never want to stop." So these women are starting their families later, putting that tradition aside in order to follow their own dreams for a little while.

Layla, a master's student at the university while simultaneously working for the Public Relations office there, feels that "it would be great to settle down, but a major part of my life is work and being ambitious... life is more than just family. It's also what you do for society and God. Some girls do better off being housewives, but its better for others to try and change society." Layla and many of the other students see themselves as a source for that change and their generation as key in helping Oman push forward. Much of this stems from the tremendous support coming from the Sultan himself. Because Sultan Qaboos holds such esteem with the citizens of Oman, the changes have come more easily and more swiftly. Iman, a public relations office at Dhofar University feels that, "the idea that women should stay home is just old. His

majesty started a renaissance, he is motivating people to think positively, and to know that boys and girls are equal,” and he holds most of the responsibility for instigating such a large cultural shift. When their grandmothers were their age, women were getting married at the age of 14 and being taken out of school, if they were even in school to begin with, and working outside of the house was unheard of, but “now we are working... we are communicating with men and we are realizing ‘I have rights, we are equal.’ Most women don’t feel equal to men, but the university education has a big influence on that.” This exposure to a new kind of freedom and the realization that it is entirely within their grasp to achieve things their mothers never even dreamed plays a large part in their desire to put off marriage in order to push themselves to succeed. “For me,” said another student, “education gives purpose to my life, that’s why I’m going to university...”

However, she noted that this is also the reason she is not married yet, “You can be controlled if you’re married, so education influences me to delay this step... when you get educated, you think different ways.” A surprising number of the unmarried women interviewed seem less than optimistic at the prospect of finding a husband soon, and most of them blamed their predicament on their advanced education. A lot of women feel that there aren’t very many Omani men willing to marry an educated woman who “thinks in different ways,” such as thinks about working outside of the house or continuing their schooling after the children are born. “Men don’t want to marry a girl that went to university. They think she is too complicated,” said Ana. Khoula agreed, saying she would rather remain “single forever!” than marry a man that would try to control her; “I can’t allow any man to control my life or my career, then I wouldn’t be me.”

And even the married women often found their job or their desire to find one a problem in their relationship. Wafaa, a newlywed in Muscat, is trying to find a secretarial or accounting job at a school, but “my husband says I don’t need to work because he can take care of both of us. It is boring for me... to sit at home all day, all I do is sleep, clean and eat, so if I have a job I will have something to do, but he doesn’t like it.” And another Muscat wife, Om-Faris, is considering furthering her education to improve her job. She says that her husband would prefer it if, instead of returning to school and continuing to work, she quit her job all together to stay home and raise their children. However, her husband who was sitting in the room during the interview was quick to note that, “in the end, I cannot force her, or she will be unhappy and angry with me, and that is something I would not want to happen.”

Yet quite a few agreed that the rising cost of living in Oman is causing more men to choose a woman with a college degree and decent job prospects, in order to maintain a standard of living that is no longer possible here on a single income. Most of the college generation has grown up accustomed to a high degree of comfort in a time when basic necessities and creature comforts were all available at a much lower cost. While some felt that men would still prefer to marry an uneducated woman that would remain at home, a number said that it was becoming more common for men to choose an educated woman out of economic necessity, to which Ana replied, “if he just wants me for my money, I’d rather be alone.” But the reality is that the future that these women envision for themselves and, more importantly, their children, does require two incomes. “The cost of life is not as it was before,” says Iman, “it costs more because families want their children to be more educated and to have good health.” And though both these services are provided free of cost by the government, few did not include the caveat that “good

school” implied private school as Wafaa stated quite clearly, “we want our children to go to a good school, to private school.”

“Raising kids is not easy,” says Om-Faris, whose oldest child is still in diapers, “I want to send my kids to university, to private school, I want them to have equal chances, but it is all expensive and it takes time and energy.” These women, in addition to recognizing the value of a quality education, also realize that it takes just as much commitment on the home front as well. They want to have jobs, but they want to be around to help their children with schoolwork, to give them the attention required to raise children that value education just as much as they do. “I want my children to be able to face the new world, they can’t be ignorant,” says Layla, “I want them to have ambitions, to help build the country. It starts when they are young, I need to help teach them myself,” adding that such attention is nearly impossible with more than three or four children. Iman agrees, “I don’t mind large families, but four is reasonable for me, I can control them and I can raise them better.” These young women were afforded the time and energy by their own parents, and the necessity of that attention is clear to them. “Some of those children,” said one woman, referring to members of her extended family, “they just cannot study. They have no quiet and the parents don’t know how to help, or the mother is too tired, or she can’t even read. For my children, I will make sure that they have everything they need to do good in school. It is my responsibility to make sure my kids can be the best they can be.”

For all of these young women, quality of life for themselves and their children is what outweighs any desire for a large family, because they do not see any purpose in having many children if those children are not healthy, well-educated, ambitious, and prosperous. Many of these women look too, to the lives of their mothers and grandmothers who have spent their

whole lives working for their children and husband. “My grandmother now old, she is tired. She always says ‘I had my children, raised them. Now my husband is gone and there is nothing left for me to do.’ I won’t be like that because I have my own dreams.” They recognize that the lives they have envisioned for themselves do not merge well with a large family; as one student, Maria, said, I work and I study, “having more than four children is like killing myself.” Says another young mother, who currently works and is getting her master’s in English, “I think that having more than four children will be exhausting. I couldn’t do it.”

#### INFLUENCES OF THE OLDER GENERATION

The new ideas that are growing out of this upsurge in education are having other impacts as well. In addition to getting married and starting families later, the different ways that these women plan to raise their children are causing some major conflicts between the generations. For many of these women entering into their husband’s family home after marriage is no longer the simple arrangement it was in the past. Indeed, while many of these women value the connection of family so close at hand, especially when it comes to the availability of childcare, there is also tension that develops in the relationship. “We can’t afford our own house, because I am not working, I am still in school, but it is difficult in his mother’s house because she runs it her way.” Afra’s situation is not uncommon. Even when both of the parents are able to work, they often rely on the grandmothers for childcare that is simply not available in many areas. Maria’s situation was similar: “... their grandmother takes care of them when I am not home, but it is difficult sometimes, we have different ideas” on how children should be raised. Maria felt that

her mother-in-law let the kids play in dirty areas, did not make them clean enough and allowed them to watch too much television.

Even unmarried women have noticed the trend among their friends; Layla observed that,

“I have many friends that are married and settled. They started off living in their husband’s family’s home. The new wife is educated, the mother is not, the mothers are very traditional and the wives are not. They have different views on hygiene, television, etc, on how to raise their children. They want to leave, but they can’t afford it. So they try to make peace with their mother-in-law, or they become housewives to raise their children. Some try to leave their children with an educated relative; it is better if the grandmother is educated. But some also think, ‘Well, she raised her children well, she raised my husband, so her ways must be OK.’ It is best when they can reach an understanding about these things or they can live in their own house.”

For many of these young couples, affording their own house is an economic reality that is simply unreachable. The cost of rent is increasing annually and the cost of land and building materials is no longer what it was. As one older woman observed, “in the past it was possible for the father to build houses for each of his sons so that they could be close but on their own. Now it costs too much to build and the older generation is all in debt. Sultan Qaboos came to Salalah and gave out gifts, he gave out land and money and jobs and the people grew fat and happy. And when he stopped, the banks came in and gave people loans, and the people stayed fat and thought they were happy. But now they realize that they are stuck in debt, and their children see this. The

children don't want to get sucked into it too, so they try to move out and have fewer children and live a life that they can actually afford. But some cannot even afford a small flat."

Even if they are not trying to leave to escape the debt cycle their parents are in, many simply are unwilling to return to their parents' house after experience a degree of freedom and privacy in university. In addition to the knowledge they gain there, these young Omanis may realize that they would prefer to live on their own, away from the noise and responsibilities that are to be found under the family's roof. Even before the issue of childrearing comes in, many a young educated wife would rather not move in with her husband's family, especially if his is more traditional than she is accustomed to.

"At first they will welcome you, give you gifts, let you do things your way... but little by little they start to say 'Oh, why do you do it that way, is that what your mother taught you? Our way is much better.' Or they talk behind your back and say that you are too wild, that your husband is not a man because he does not control everything you do. It is too hard, when you know that you are doing it to make it happy and you are miserable." Thus was the plight of Amna, a graduate from Sultan Qaboos University who graduated and married just over two years ago. She finally felt her situation so unbearable that she told her husband she would go back to her family if he did not buy them their own house. Luckily for her, her husband had been thinking the same thing for some time and was just waiting to have enough money and find the right house. They moved into their own house about six months ago and she says they are both much happier. "But there are some women, their husbands say 'No, she is my mother and you must get along. She has had children before...why would you think your ways are better?' But those women do not have nice husbands. I would not want to be them."

Some people also believe that this generational gap is having an impact on the younger generation even now. In many families, the grandparents were unable to get an education when they were young and some feel that this has rubbed off on their children and grandchildren. As a foreigner living in Salalah for nearly 30 years and married to an Omani man, Noor has witnessed the changes taking place in Oman from the beginning. In fact, her position as the second wife in a traditional Dhofari household gives her a unique perspective. She said that the mothers on “the other side of the house” (referring to her husband’s two other wives living in their conjoined household, still very common in Salalah) were never educated themselves, so they do not push their children to achieve as much as she pushes hers. “I’ve seen most of these children grow up from babies and I have told them many times they can come to my house for a quiet place to study; the television is always on over there, it is never quiet. Sometimes they came over for help, but it is too hard if the parents aren’t trying to help them too...so some of them have dropped out now, they are just dependent. It is sad to watch.”

Layla, who is Noor’s eldest daughter, agrees:

“With my other [half] sisters, I have two ambitious sisters from the same mother, and two not-so ambitious sisters. I don’t know if it’s because of their mothers or older siblings or what. Their older siblings have low jobs, are dependent on their parents still. It’s too bad that the girls are turning out to be like that too. Me and my sister and brother, we try to be an example to them that it’s OK to be yourself and to think about yourself, to want to achieve. I brought one of my sisters to the university, so she could see what it’s like to have an important job, to have colleagues and responsibilities. She tried working in a store once and thought it was interesting because people came in and she could see

the street and watch what was happening. But if she works a bit harder, she could have a higher job, a challenge.”

However, not everyone feels that the lack of an education in the parents is the root cause of a younger generation often struggling with education. Indeed, many feel quite the opposite, saying that their mothers and grandmother’s want the young women of their families to go to school, to university precisely because it is an opportunity that was never afforded to them. Iman believes this fully, that “things have changed, now more people are pushing their children to receive a good education. The parents, they know the meaning of education even if they are not educated.” Khoula, on the other hand, feels that it is only the women in her mother’s generation recognize the importance of education, but those older than her are still of the belief that women should not go to school. “My mother is not very educated; her mother didn’t allow her to go to school, it was not appropriate. But she returned to school for a little time, to learn to read. People in my mother’s generation agree that women should work, get educated. But my grandmothers and older aunts still think it is more important to marry and raise a family.”

While it is impossible to make any generalizations about whether the older generation’s lack of education is root cause of the push for education or forms a barrier to achievement, it is clear that as more families encourage their young women to pursue an education, the numbers of young women in school will continue to increase at an impressive rate. These young women are only the second generation of women to complete the twelve years schooling provided by the government, but already it is clear that their commitment to education will have tremendous positive effects on the next generation. Furthermore, the young women interviewed know that

they will be role models for the girls and young women after them, “maybe then young girls will get courage from [witnessing] something glorious that other women have done.”

### THINGS THAT MAY BE HOLDING OMAN BACK

“In the end... her father is not even encouraging her to go to school or get a job, he would rather see all his daughters married to rich husbands. Mostly in general, parents don’t encourage their daughters, they just want them to marry someone rich.” This is the end of Layla’s story about her two half-sisters, whom she and her mother encouraged to work harder. The expectations of family and society still loom large as barriers to women that choose to pursue their education or a career. Oman is full of many families that will not allow their daughters to attend university, especially if it means reducing their chances for a suitable marriage. At the heart of it, Oman still remains a very traditional country and the expectations of this culture hold many women back. While many feel very positive about the changes that the Sultan has brought about, they still recognize the reality of trying to achieve something in a country that is still adjusting to the concept of women working outside of the home, something that is clearly playing a large role in the development that is taking place in the Sultanate.

“Omani men,” says Habiba, “see their mothers and grandmothers and think, ‘My wife, she will stay home like the women in my family. It is the right way, she will raise the children and take care of me.’ We do not want to be that way anymore... but the men still think this way.” This goes back to the problem that many of the women face of finding a husband. The men in their generation still place a high value on a young wife, an obedient wife that wants

nothing more than to stay home and raise the children. “Even my brothers say that, they say they won’t let their wives work because who will raise the children? My brothers are younger than me. I am in school and they say, ‘That is good for you, I am happy for you, but when I marry, she will stay home.’ How can they say it is OK for me but they would not want to marry a woman like me?” Habiba’s concern is that because even her younger brothers think this way, she will not be able to find a man her age willing to marry an educated woman that wants to work. “I think to myself that it is good that I will work. I can be happy with my job if I never get married and have children. I want to have children, but sometimes I think it will never happen.”

It is easy to see why, even as the opinions of these women change, most of them feel that the men in their generation are still stuck in the past. The men still feel that they need to be the breadwinner in the family and still want to come home every day to a wife that is waiting for them, a clean house and a fresh cooked meal. Of course, these women are not content to stay at home and wait on their husbands, creating a growing population of well-educated young women that are still living at home with no immediate prospects for marriage. It is true in Layla’s experience as well, “approximately most of the girls I know that have graduated stay home and are single. They have ambitions and expectations, they want more from a man... It is easier for a girl who didn’t go to university to get married, her expectations are lower.” Om-Faris says that most men “just want housewives... They like to control their wives so maybe that is why they would prefer not to have an educated wife.” A number of the women felt that even the men that they go to university with did not consider marrying a young woman with a university degree because she would be too old, even though upon graduation he would be the same age.

Noor's observation was that "many of the parents, they think that a women who is 23, 24, she is getting too old. Even Layla, as she is older she gets less attention from the men. But they also see her in the newspaper, on television, so they know she has a strong personality. That is also why. They want a meek woman, and a young uneducated girl is just that." Layla, Noor's eldest daughter, is very prominent in the local new because her job for the university puts her very much in the public eye. Noor's younger daughter, Susan, married earlier this year, but her husband is only half Omani, his mother being French Moroccan, and he grew up partially in France. "I would be better off finding a non-Omani, or half, like my sister" is Layla's conclusion, "Omani men, Arab men, they can never be happy unless they can completely control their wife." These women point to their friends that are married and happy, they continue to have hope, but as each interview progressed, it seemed that their true feelings on the situation came out. One woman interviewed said she felt that Omani men weren't changing at all, "they will be friends with the girls at their school, but in the end they will marry a young girl because they think younger is better, and purer if she doesn't go to university."

But in the face of all this, they recognize the importance of hope. "Oman will become a modern country... we will move forward... but it will take time," believes Iman, "Sultan Qaboos is an open-minded guy, he will make sure that we can become modern and keep our culture." The Sultan himself was educated in the United Kingdom and this worldly education is evident in his policy. From the beginning of his rule, His Majesty placed an emphasis on equality, opportunity, and progress, and while many feel that the country is stuck in its traditions, they acknowledge the changes that he has brought about have had wide impacts. "When you think about the past, and you think about now, you know that Oman has changed very fast. Maybe too

fast for some people, but we want to be modern. We can't be modern in 50 years, it has to happen now." It is true that in order to compete in this changing world Oman has to become an economically competitive nation, and the Sultan knows this. It is convincing people that this change is better for everyone that proves to be a bit more difficult.

Those interviewed were asked if they thought that Oman's strong connection to tradition would be a problem for Oman as it tries to develop. No one thought that it would prevent Oman from developing eventually, but some thought that it would slow Oman down, especially in Salalah. "Salalah is very traditional, it is very important for people to maintain that identity," observes Khoula, "Salalah will take at least twenty years to do whatever Muscat changes in five years. This can be good or bad, but that is how it is." And while everyone knew that some things about tradition in Oman are not compatible with the changes that are happening, none are worried that Oman risked losing its Omani identity. "Oman will never be like Dubai," continues Khoula, "In Dubai, all you see are foreigners, not Arabs. In ten years we will be the same as we are now, maybe with more buildings. But we will still be Arab, we will still be Omani." The comparison to Dubai was made over and over again, as something that Sultan Qaboos and the people of Oman want to avoid. "We don't want to become like Dubai. It is possible for us to develop and maintain our Omani-ness," agrees Iman. "When different cultures come together, you will have mixing [of cultures]... and you will lose some values and traditions. We must work hard to maintain our culture, but we must also let go of the old things that are not good. Some things about change are good, some are bad" and when we face problems, we will work together to overcome them.

Most of those interviewed felt that it was precisely this strong connection to Omani culture that would allow Oman to develop gracefully. “In Dubai, there is nothing but tall buildings. There is nothing to do but shop, and there are only Indians,” lamented one woman. “Oman can become modern, but there will still be people who say ‘No, we don’t need to build the tallest building,’ or, ‘we can leave the ocean how it is, we don’t have to change everything about our country.’ In Dubai, I think there is no one like this, no one that stops to think about it. Because our history is so important here, there will always be someone to stop and ask ‘Will this make us less Omani, will this be good for everyone or only a few people.’” It is this strong belief in the ability of Oman, and specifically His Majesty, to direct Oman on the best path that will do so much to carry Oman into the future so well. Though it is not appropriate to speak ill of the Sultan, few people seem to have any desire to do this anyways when it comes to the many development policies that have been enacted under his rule. “The new policies of the Sultan have played a big role in encouraging people to think in new ways. Not just to have fewer children, but to let their daughters go to school, to raise their children to want to change the world” in new and important ways. Especially in healthcare and education, “the Sultan has made big changes. Educating women on having fewer children for their own health and the health of their children, which is very important and has a big effect,” that is just one major way that people have responded to his policies.

Many of these people also believe that as university education becomes more widespread, they will take root in society, that after a time, it will not be because of the Sultan’s policies, but because people simply begin to behave a different way, to believe in new ideas themselves. “I think that more women in university will have a positive impact on the country. In the past, there

was no education for women. Now they are managers and other high jobs, and they are very active in society. If Omani women get the chance to prove themselves, I think they will develop the country. There is potential for women to play a big role in the future... Now we are getting a chance to show that.” Khoula’s opinion is reflective of her generation. The women that will graduate with Khoula and those after her are not only looking forward to finding a good job, they are *expecting* it.

## CONCLUSIONS AND THE FUTURE

The progress in Oman is an excellent example of effective development policy that is in many ways widely socially acceptable, with far-reaching impacts well beyond the scope of the initial investment. There are many things to be gleaned from the experience of Oman and in many ways this country provides the perfect location for further field research because of its position as a developing nation with a very diverse native population, a strong history of tribalism and a relatively conservative populace. It is true that Oman has access to oil wealth, and its location in the rapidly developing Gulf places it near massive amounts of wealth and tourism, but Oman has undergone this extraordinary transformation due more to the result of effective, culturally appropriate policy rather than any massive wealth. Indeed, Oman does have large oil reserves, but compared to many other oil producing nations, its oil wealth is not similarly proportional to its population, providing only the capital to institute efficient policy, not to purchase development outright, as is the case in other Gulf countries.

That the education reforms of Sultan Qaboos have been so widely accepted and so wildly popular speaks volumes about the strong, though often unspoken, demand for improved access to education, for males as well as females. There is no doubt of the importance of education for

improving the lives of individuals, but the impact that it has on other key tenets of development, such as a sustainable birth rate, are not so widely known. Undoubtedly there are people working around the world to articulate to governments and international organizations the astounding importance of education for the sake of economic development. What must be done is to ensure that funding for these programs are made readily available, from individual donor nations, non-governmental organizations and international bodies tasked with the herculean mission of “development.”

There is no point in pursuing complicated economic policies of free-market reforms if there is not an educated citizenry to take advantage of the reforms. A free-market economic framework without a functioning domestic economy derived from a healthy, educated population is useless, and in fact, simply leaves a nation wide open for exploitation by other interests. In the end, in order to have a well-functioning economy, a country’s population must exhibit certain characteristics, among them health, education and food security. When people no longer struggle daily for each meal or continue to reproduce in the face of hardship simply to have a few surviving children, that is when a country can begin to seriously set down to the task of developing. There are many developing nations that are in the midst of war or famine and these are things that the world can come together to end and prevent in the future. But it lies solely with the governments of those nations to decide to take the first real step toward development and institute a culture of education in their nation. It is education, health, and food security that will ultimately lead to development, and lack of these that leads nations to collapse.

Lastly, much unlike the development of its neighbors, Oman has embarked on a development path that places a high value on maintaining a strong cultural identity. Oman’s history is very unique in the Gulf; centuries of trade along the East African coastline and nations

on the Indian ocean have given Oman a diverse population and while predominately united under a single religion, the ideas and traditions of the different regions in Oman reflect this distinctive past. The remarkable ability of the Sultanate to navigate this delicate issue in a very confident and successful manner is evidence of the abilities of the Sultan and the adaptability of the people. Furthermore, it is inspiring to see such tremendous growth that pays so much homage to its past, a trait many western development theorists tend to dismiss as impossible or unnecessary. Thus, Oman's development is truly an example of western style development done with a mind for history and the people that development is ultimately about.

Exactly what the future holds for Oman is impossible to know, but it is clear that the vision that Sultan Qaboos has for his country, and that so many of the citizens hold in common, is determined to push Oman forward. Moreover, people recognize the risks associated with such rapid development, the risk of "turning into Dubai," of losing that which makes Oman Omani. So much of this develop comes from the policy of the government, and especially as it regards families and children, so much is the direct result of the education of girls and women. The importance of educating the females in society is rarely overlooked by a nation, but it is so often underestimated in the impact it can have. Along with sound economic policy, improving education and healthcare are the most important things a developing nation can do to achieve development, and in reality, sound economic policy can only take you so far as your population can reach, therefore an educated, healthy populous may even more important.

Even more so, the sense that something amazing is taking place in Oman right now is undeniable and the impact it is having on the young people experiencing it is tangible. These women have an opportunity that was never available to even their mothers in many cases, they

recognize this and have it in their mind that they are not going to let it slip away. These women see themselves as a generation of change:

“We are doing something not many women in Oman have had the chance to do in the past, and not many women in the Arab world can do even now. Oman is developing and it is becoming modern in ways that are more important than tall buildings and lots of money. Saudi Arabia is rich, but their women aren’t even allowed to drive a car. Dubai is rich, but they have lost everything that makes them Arab. Oman will become rich, but our women will also have rights and jobs, and our children will still know our history. Oman will be developed, it will be rich in money, but it will be rich in culture too. There are some things that take more than money to achieve, and Sultan Qaboos has achieved them, and Omanis know that and embrace it.” (Amna, 23.)

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