



Omani Women's Empowerment within Decades

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Abstract: Since first opening up to the modern world, in less than forty years Oman has undergone modernization and development at a phenomenal rate so that now its national infrastructure is comparable to that of many of its contemporary neighbours. From the beginning, top priority was given to the building up of a state education system that would offer universal education to all Omanis irrespective of gender. This marked the first explicit departure from the traditional cultural-social norms and discrimination against females, signalling the government's intention to open up for future generations of Omanis of both sexes the opportunity to enter into new and diverse ways of life. Formerly, the role of females had been almost wholly confined to marriage, motherhood and domestic duties. Omani females did not receive any education except in religious matters. In the last forty years the previous situation has been reversed, whereby the great majority of Omani females are literate, whilst almost all of those born since 1970 have been educated in the state school system. With the entry of females into post-secondary education, Omani women are in a position to pursue personal aims, professional careers and to reach the highest positions in their country. Owing to their educational attainments, many Omani women have the ability and confidence to fulfil roles that were once the preserve of males.

This paper aims to present the changeable of the Omani females status before and after the renaissance 1970. Therefore, a descriptive analysis method was used for this study. This study was depending on the census data and demographic surveys to identify statistical associations between basic socio-economic and demographic characteristics of Omani females.

This study was able to determine Omani women are currently living under circumstances of changeability and contradiction. The government has to a great extent granted them equality of rights with their male counterparts; however most women in Oman continue to be essentially subordinate to the men folk of their family and more particularly to their husbands when they marry.

The results of this study suggest a need to integrate in-depth information gathered from Omani male regarding their attitudes towards their female counterparts, especially the attitudes of husbands towards the roles their spouses play as wives, mothers and working women. Furthermore, attitudes of unmarried males should also be examined relating to their preferences regarding a future wife, such as whether they would choose a working woman or not, and if a working woman, the kind of occupation that would be acceptable to the male respondents and the reasons behind their preferences.

Keywords: Omani women, Socio-economic, Educational attainments, Marriage, Fertility

1. INTRODUCTION

Omani women have experienced dramatic changes in their status since 1970 when the Omani government began its task of designing and implementing policies that were aimed at modernizing the country over a period of several decades. Focusing on the specific case of Oman, this research provides an overview of the development of some basic indicators for its social and economic transitions: (1) the developmental experience of the country and its impact on education for women and on the status of women; (2) patterns of women's participation in the workforce as a result of changes in their educational attainment; and (3) the impact of women's education and economic participation in terms of possible changes in marriage, fertility and domestic decision-making patterns. Once more, it has to be pointed out that, as the Sultanate embarked on modernization only in 1970, there are various limitations to the demographic literature published for the Sultanate.

In the Sultanate of Oman—one of the developing countries of the world—the status of women has been transformed within a single generation. Since 1970 females have been accorded the same rights

to education as their male counterparts and their circumstances are catching up in many ways with Western standards for women. Education has played a crucial role towards the emancipation of Omani women. It is to be noted that *education* has led to the participation by Omani women in the labour force, whilst in the industrializing West it was market forces and sheer economic necessity that led—or even compelled—women to go out to work. The most obvious example that can be cited here regarding Omani women is drawn not merely from my own life-cohort, but from my own family. I am holding a PhD degree from the United Kingdom, whilst my mother cannot read or write.

The traditional Omani notion that ‘a woman’s place is in the home’ is based on an almost universal tradition amongst sedentary populations whereby the vast majority of men ‘go out’ to work whilst the women stay at home, with the home and the family thus becoming the setting for their lives. The role of the married woman—wife and mother—developed in complexity in various ways in different societies, and in many of these such women came to occupy the role of what was later called the ‘housewife’. The appropriate domestic and public roles for women are often discussed and envisaged in the light of the development and definitions created by western societies. In developed countries the concept of the ‘housewife’ has gradually evolved and changed over the last one hundred and fifty years, especially since the Industrial Revolution.

However, the evolution of the role and concept of ‘housewife’ has been gradual, being driven by the changes in the patterns of labour, social and economic activity that arose in response to the pressures created by industrial development, rural/urban migration and living conditions in the growing cities (Robertson 1999).

My own mother’s generation lived in the way Hakim described, lending a hand wherever needed in the household economy. The difference was that economic conditions in combination with cultural and religious trends had restricted the scope of activity for females in public. There was no economic driver to give the impetus for change in the social role of Omani women and there was no external forum where such initiatives might take place. However, given the driver of the industrial economy and the external forum of the workplace, western females and even their families had begun slowly to enter into the attitudinal transition even before the outbreak of the 1914–1918 War (Matthews 1987). With the entry of western women into the industrial labour force, the view arose that women who went out to work were ‘productive’, whilst those women whose activities were restricted to the domestic tasks involved in maintaining the household were ‘unproductive’. This perception created an added stimulus of motivation for many women.

In 1800, women whose work consisted largely of caring for their families were considered productive workers. By 1900, they had been formally relegated to the census category of ‘dependents’, a category that included infants, young children, the sick, and the elderly (Folbre 1991:464).

By the end of the nineteenth century, most economists had come to agree that all paid services should be considered productive, and many advocated that the term ‘unproductive’ be dropped from the language of their discipline. Yet, almost to a man, they also agreed that nonmarket services lay outside the realm of economics and therefore did not contribute to economic growth. While paid domestic servants were considered part of the labour force, unpaid domestic workers were not. Non-market production—a wife’s work in the home, for instance—was implicitly defined as unproductive (Folbre 1991:470).

The complicated and lengthy transition in the development of the role of the western housewife towards emancipation and equality of treatment in the workplace is traced by various writers (e.g. Shivaraman 1975, Folbre 1991, Niemeyer 2000). At the risk of oversimplifying the summary, the role of women in western cultures began to change owing to the first and second waves of feminist activism. The first wave came at the turn of the twentieth century with the campaign for the extension of female education and equal voting-rights with men, which was a crucial and prominent campaign for the first generation of US and British Feminists. With the breaking-down of the barriers to women in these areas, the second-wave feminists campaigned for the residual (but substantial) discrimination enshrined in ‘male’ versus ‘female’ jobs and working conditions (Code 2003, Blakeley & Bryson 2007).

The accelerated course of change for Omani women in comparison to Western women is worthy of our attention. In order to investigate the processes driving this rapid change and to assess the

implications for Omani women and for Omani society more widely, the present study examines the changeable status of Omani women in the Sultanate of Oman. Generally education is very important for females as it offers increased opportunities of engaging in employment and the chance to delay marriage and childbearing, whilst also promoting their relative (or even absolute) independence in choosing a husband (Phang 1995b, Ravanera et al. 1998, Lindstrom & Paz 2001). If this holds true for females in developed, westernized societies, the value of education is all the more crucial to women in developing countries, especially in patriarchal societies such as those in the Arabian Gulf.

The provision of free education to Omani females has been almost revolutionary in the role that education has played in empowering women to make decisions regarding their lives and in considerably widening the range of options that are open to Omani women in making choices in key areas and domains of their lives, even though these choices often remain within cultural constraints. The Omani government has provided the means for women to emancipate themselves through education, the right to work enshrined in law and equal status with men in the eyes of the law (Allen 1987; Allen & Rigsbee 2000). Whilst Omani women have experienced considerable growth in their ability to make choices and take decisions for themselves (even by the standards of certain societies in parts of Europe) the more prominent feature has been the rapidity of change rather than the scale of change. Full female emancipation in the industrial and post-industrial societies has taken 150 years or longer to be firmly established, and has often required legislation to compel the changes, even now the process is not complete. However, when women first received the vote, attended university and stood for elections, these events were considered to be landmarks of huge proportions in the development of British society (Kamm 1966). They were the long-awaited results of a slow, concerted and painful process of confrontation, struggle and contestation (Winsor 1914, Shivaraman 1975, Roberts 1995).

In the space of 45 years Omani women have been empowered by peaceful means to expand their previously restricted social roles. It is not surprising therefore that less than forty five years after the project of social change was launched, Omani women should still be faced with certain traditional and social constraints on their scope of activities. The sort of coercive social-engineering legislation that was used in western societies was not appropriate to the social fabric and cultural milieu of Omani society. Cooperation rather than confrontation was chosen as the way forward, and this was achieved through education for both males and females. It is education, not conflict, which has been the driver of social change (Allen 1987). Education is the vehicle by which Omani women have been brought to their present position by a fast-track programme of action that has achieved in one generation what has taken several generations for women in western societies, in the Arab World and closer to home in the neighbouring Arabian Gulf countries.

2. GEOGRAPHY

The Sultanate of Oman is located in the south-eastern part of the Arabian Peninsula. It is the second largest country in the Arabian Peninsula, lying between latitudes 16 40' and 26 20' North and longitudes 51 50' and 59 40' East. The total land area is approximately 309,500 sq. km. It has a coastline extending almost 3,165 km. from the Strait of Hormuz in the northeast to the border with Yemen in the southwest, and is bounded by the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. The country shares land and sea boundaries with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. The coastal plain overlooking the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea forms the most important plain of Oman, the area of which amounts to three percent of the total landmass, while the mountains make up fifteen percent of the total area. Sand and desert cover the greatest area, representing approximately 82 percent of the total area, most of which lies in the Empty Quarter.

The Sultanate of Oman is composed of eleven administrative divisions that are called Governorates (Muscat, Dhofar, Musandam, Al-Batinah North, Al-Batinah South, Ad-Dakhiliyah, Ash-Sharqiyah North, Ash-Sharqiyah South, Adh-Dhahirah, Al-Buraimi, Al-Wusta). Each of these governorates and regions is divided into smaller administrative sub-divisions that can conveniently be termed "provinces" (or "walayats", to adapt the Arabic term). There are sixty provinces. According to the census of December 1993 the population of the Sultanate of Oman stood at 2,018,074, whilst by the census of 2003 and 2010 this had increased to 2,340,815 and 2,773,479 respectively. Of that number, 76.1 percent were recorded as Omani citizens and 23.9 percent as non-Omani expatriates (MONE Census Results 2003 & 2010). At that time the overall population density was only about 9 persons per square kilometre (about 19 per square mile). The capital is Muscat. The population is overwhelmingly

Arab, but significant minorities of Indians, Pakistanis and East Africans are found in the principal ports. The majority of the population consists of Ibādhī Muslims; Sunnī Muslims form the other major religious group. Arabic is the official language.

Although it may appear to be pointless repetition, the most prominent feature of the recent history of Oman is the fact that the government of the Sultanate embarked the country on the course of modernization and development in 1970, twenty to thirty years later than other countries in the region. That in itself is highly significant.

However, what is also of great importance is the fact that the conditions and circumstances existing in the Sultanate were virtually mediaeval, and that they resembled those that were current in the neighbouring countries in the 1920s and 1930s (Zahlan 1989).



Figure1. Geographical Disposition of the Sultanate of Oman

Source: <http://www.infoplease.com/atlas/country/oman.html>

3. BEFORE THE RENAISSANCE 1970

Since the early 1970s, the massive development projects undertaken by the Government have brought rapid material and social change. Nearly all Omanis, when asked what they thought of the new ruler, would almost invariably reply, “Before him, there was nothing. Now, there is everything” (Townsend 1977, Wikan 1982, Barth 1983, Allen 1987, Kechichian 1995, Allen & Rigsbee 2000). Information and data on Oman in general are limited, and until recently there has been a particular lack of scientific material regarding Omani women. From 1932 to 1970 Oman sank to the level of one of the world’s most backward states during the reign of Sayyid Sa’id bin Taymour (Allen 1987). There were no official statistics produced in the Sultanate at all. The first published statistical yearbook was issued in 1973 and that contained only estimated data; the first general census was conducted in 1993. However, the United Nations published estimated data for Oman which will serve for this section.

Sayyid Sa’id bin Taymour ruled Oman for 38 years from 1932 to 1970 and during that period he discouraged education because he thought that schools were hatcheries for dangerous ideas. He also forced all women to be veiled (Allen 1987). Prior to 1970, modern education in Oman was confined to three primary schools with 900 boys; there was no provision for the education of girls (Al-Lamki 1999; Rassekh 2004). Schooling in the past was confined to schools for memorizing the Holy Quran. However, Omani women managed to make contributions in many cultural aspects such as in Islamic jurisprudence, book-copying and education. Women participated in these fields by educating juniors in the Holy Quran, the teachings of Islam, prayers and fasting, and the art of handwriting and basic mathematics. In this context, there emerged certain women who contributed towards the propagation of science and education. Sayyidah Thurayā bint Muhammad bint ‘Azzān Al-Būsa’idī was appointed by Shaykh Sulaymān bin Zahrān Ar-Riyāmī as an agent and teacher in the Al-Wakīl Mosque in

Muscat. The Mosque was a centre for sciences and knowledge in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century (Al-Sidani 1984).

Early marriage was a social norm at that time. Omani females prior to 1970 were getting married between the ages of nine and fifteen years old (Al-Sidani 1984). Marriages were normally arranged. In Oman it was very common for newly-married couples to live for the first years with the husband's family as the newlyweds worked on building a house of their own. Even adult, single children remained at home until marriage or until they needed to move to another location for work. The family played a large role in helping to arrange the marriage. Sometimes marriages would be arranged outside the family circle, but they had to be made with someone at the same level of social status. The bride rarely knew that she was to be married earlier than two days before the wedding day, sometimes they were even informed only on the wedding-day itself. Likewise, the bride often did not see the bridegroom until the wedding-night. Whilst these customs have modified, certain features continue to exist in less extreme ways.

The age-at-first-marriage has a cumulative effect on fertility and mortality. It affects the number of children ever-born and the number of living children. If a woman is married at a younger age (under 15 years old) then that will increase her reproductive span. On the other hand, if the age-at-first-marriage of girls increases then this will eventually lead to a decrease in fertility and will also result in various social changes that have impacts on the roles of women and economic structures, which in their turn will bring about further reductions in fertility.

4. STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

For developing countries that have only recently embarked on modernization, the range of options and ambitions on the agenda of the majority of citizens (both male and female) tends to be limited to the core areas of employment, education and training, improvement in the standard of life and emancipation from previous structurally or accidentally imposed disadvantages. At the expense of being repetitive, Oman began modern development only in 1970, and so it is a small number of core themes and concerns that necessarily recur throughout a study such as the current one. Once again, before commencing the discussion in this part, we must once more refer to the paucity of background information and specific studies, academic or otherwise.

4.1. Women and Legislation

The main source of legislation in the Sultanate of Oman is the Islamic Sharī'ah. The laws which related to Omani women issues are depended on two basic principles: first, the principle of equity between men and women; second, the principle of the biological nature of women that may require the enshrining in specific legislation of certain issues relating to women such as employment and social security.

Accordingly, Omani legislation contains specific articles concerning women, addressing gender equality regarding their rights and duties. All citizens are equal before the law and share the same civil rights and obligations without discrimination on the basis of sex, origin, colour, language, religion, sect, domicile or social status.

- The Omani Labour Law issued in 1973 to ensure the employment equality between men and women in the private sector and public sector. To protect women and consider their distinct nature there are specific rules: It is not permitted to engage women between 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. except by a decision from the minister concerned, and it is also not allowed to engage women in works harmful to their health or integrity. According to this law, women are entitled to maternity leave prior, during and after childbirth.
- The Civil Service Law issued in 1980 to govern equal opportunities for men and women in jobs and pay provided that they have the same qualifications and experience. In consideration for women the law favoured women in certain aspects such as, private interests, family circumstances and religious factors. For example, women's entitlement to full paid maternity leave and leave without pay for childcare. A Muslim woman is also entitled to mourning leave with full pay for four months and ten days. Married employees are entitled to leave without pay to accompany their spouses when sent abroad for study or work subject to a maximum of two years.

- The Islamic Shari'ah Personal and Family law allows women to provide in marriage contracts for their right to divorce their husbands whenever they want without stating any reasons thereof.
- The Social Security Law 1991 and amendments thereto, provide for women to receive a pension. For instance, women at the age of fifty-five years can receive an old age pension compared to sixty years for men. Also widows are provided with a pension.

4.2. Women's Healthcare

In 1970 in Oman there were only two small hospitals with 12 beds each with no more than 13 doctors, none of them a dentist or a pharmacist. The first main tasks that were entrusted to the Ministry of Health in 1970 were (a) to design and implement a healthcare service and (b) to secure health services and public healthcare, to heighten awareness of behavioural risks to health and to improve the level of health education (MONE 2003b).

The first three Five Year Development Plans during the period 1976–1990 concentrated on the establishment of the basic infrastructure of the health sector, whilst in the Fourth Five Year Plan (1991–1995) some 23 health programmes were executed, which addressed a specific top-priority health concern. The Fifth Five Year Plan (1996–2000), and the Sixth (2001–2005) were based on the outlook of the World Health Organization regarding health development. These plans were self-contained national plans that covered the health regions based on an objective analysis of the health conditions in each Governorate and Region in Oman. Health services were delivered to women through a mixture of diverse programmes, including the mother-and-child care programme, the birth-spacing programme, and the AIDS & STD (sexually transmitted diseases) control programme. There are other programmes related to reproductive health, malnutrition control and health awareness, and several indicators of the improvement in women's health conditions show significant gains. The Ministry of Health Annual Statistical Report (2005& 2016) showed the following progress:

- **Births attended** by trained health personnel increased from 60 percent in 1983 to 93.8 percent in 1999. The reproductive health survey revealed that in 2000 the percentage of mothers provided with pre-natal medical care had increased to 97.9 percent and for those receiving post-natal medical care the rate had to 79.9 percent (MONE 2003b).
- The **incidence rate of miscarriage** for each thousand women of childbearing age during the period 1995 to 2000 declined from 17 to 12 and further to 9.2 in 2005.

The **crude death rate** declined by 72 percent from 13.3 in 1980 to 3.65 per thousand people in 2000 and to 2.9 in 2015. More significantly, the **life expectancy rate** for females rose from 48.1 years in 1970 to 58.8 years in 1980, to 69.5 years in 1990, to 74.3 years in 2000 and to 78.8 in 2015 (Figure 2).

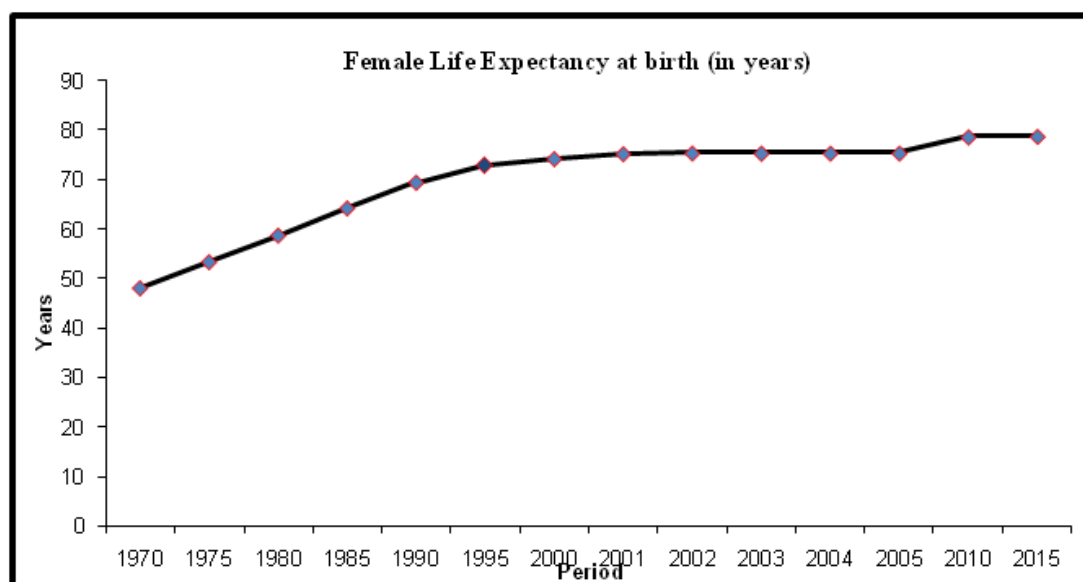


Figure 2. Life expectancy rates for females 1970–2015

Source: Ministry of Health, Statistical Year Books 2001, 2016.

- The **crude birth rate** fell from 50 to 32.6 and then to 24.8 per thousand of population respectively in the years 1980, 2000 and 2005. This was partly due to the wide-scale use of contraceptives, which increased among married women in the age-group 15–49 years from 24 percent in 1990 to 31 percent in 1999 and to 34.1 in 2015 (see Figure 3).
- However, the birth rate remains high even though the **total fertility rate** has diminished remarkably (owing to the spread of education among females and the increase in average marriage age) from 7.2 to 3.1 to 2.9 children for each woman of childbearing age between 1970, 2005 and 2015 (see Figure 4).
- The **age-specific fertility rate** shows a peak in the same age-range of 25 to 29 years, although the median variant between the two periods shows a marked decrease (see Figure 5).
- **Infant mortality** (amongst those less than one year old) declined by 86 percent from 118 per thousand live births in 1972 to 16.7 in 2000 to 9.5 in 2015 (see Figure 3).
- **Child mortality** (amongst those less than five years old) declined by 88 percent from 181 per thousand live births in 1972 to 21.7 in 2000 to 11.4 in 2015 (see Figure 3).
- The **rate of still-births** fell by 40 percent from 16.6 per thousand births in 1980 to 10 in 2000 and fell thereafter to 9.1 in 2005 (see Figure 3).
- **Maternal mortality** fell from 22 per 100,000 live births in 1995 to 16.1 in 2000 *i.e.* a reduction by 27 percent in only five years, and to 15.4 in 2005, whilst in 2015 it a bit increased to 17.5 (see Figure 3).

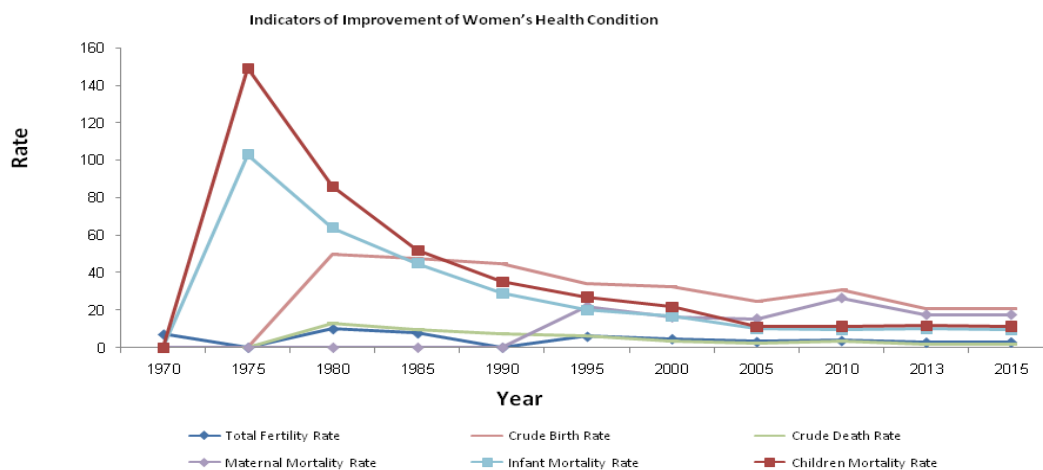


Figure3. Indicators of improvement in women's health 1970–2015

Source: Ministry of Health, Statistical Year Books 2005& 2016.

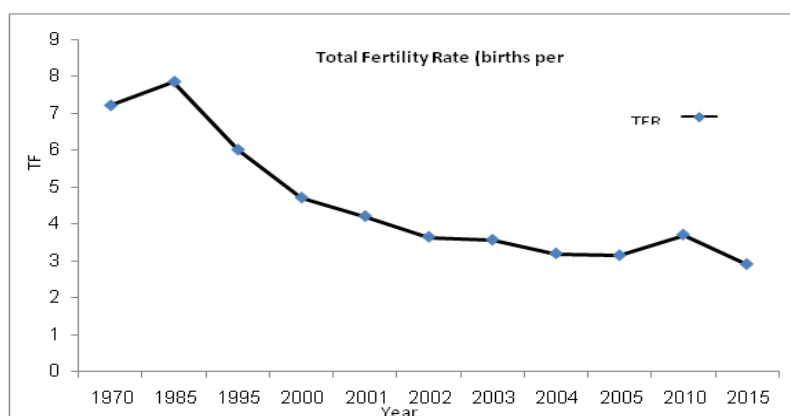


Figure4. Total fertility rate (births per woman 15–49 years) 1970–2015

Source: Ministry of Health, Statistical Year Books 2005& 2016.

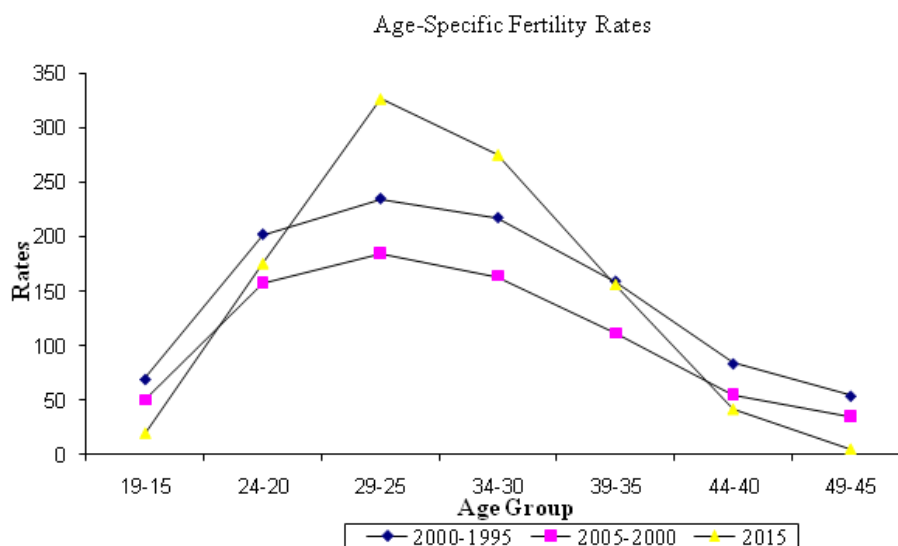


Figure 5. Age-specific fertility rates medium variant 1995–2005

Source: United Nations (2005) World Population Prospects, 2004 Revision (on-line data). Ministry of Health, Statistical Year Books 2016.

4.3. Omani Women and Social Care

The Ministry of Social Development is responsible for an extensive social care programme for women and children. It is entrusted with two main tasks: (1) drawing up plans and policies for the advancement of women, and (2) setting up and supervising centres and associations that serve women’s purposes. It has created several social organizations that aim to advance women’s knowledge and awareness in various fields in order to enable them to participate on the development of society.

- **Women’s Rehabilitation Centres:** There are twelve such centres nowadays. Five of them were built by the government and the rest of them were built with women’s voluntary contributions. These centres train women, developing their skills and absorbing their energies in productive work.
- **Rural Women’s Development Centres:** These are social institutions set up by voluntary work in villages and rural areas to mainstream women into the development process. The centres focus on capacity building and raising awareness of the role of women in development. There were thirteen such centres in 2015.
- **Women’s Associations:** The founding of these associations goes back to 1972 when the first Oman Women’s Association was established in Muscat. In 2000 there were 27 such associations across the Sultanate, with 30 percent of them located in Al-Batinah, 18.5 percent in Ash-Sharqiyah, 15 percent in Adh-Dhahirah and Dhofar and 11 percent, 7.4 percent and 3.7 percent in Ad-Dakhiliyah, Muscat and Musandam respectively. Nowadays there are 38 Women’s associations across the Sultanate. The aim of these associations is to provide women with skills and to advance women’s knowledge and awareness in various fields, whilst also organizing fairs, bazaars, workshops, symposiums and lectures, in addition to establishing rewarding projects to boost the income of the individual associations.

4.4. Women’s Education and Training

One of the Sultan’s first priorities was to address illiteracy, realising that education “even if only under the shade of a tree”, was the most effective weapon against ignorance. The rate of school construction prior to 1970 averaged one school every 19 years. The first school in Oman was built in 1914, followed by a second in 1940, with the As-Sa’idīyah School in Muscat. A sister Sa’idīyah School was established in 1959 in the far southern town of Ṣalālah. This was the last school to be built in Oman before the Renaissance. Within the first five months of his rule, 16 primary schools were established to educate over 9,500 pupils, a 66.2 percent increase in the number of children receiving education. Additionally, girls were able to receive education for the first time. Educational

establishments spread dramatically across the Sultanate for the next five years. By 1975, there were 262 schools and institutions, comprising 213 primary schools, 45 preparatory schools, three secondary schools and one teacher training institute. In the 2006/2007 academic year figures state that there are now 1,053 schools throughout the country, covering primary, preparatory and secondary levels of education. During the 2006/2007 academic year, there were 563,602 students 289,470 male students and over 274,132 female students attending schools from primary level to secondary level throughout the Sultanate (Table 1).

Table1. Number of schools and enrolment by gender 1969-2012

Year	No. of schools	No. of students	No. of girls	Proportion of girls percent
1969/1970	3	900	0	0
1970/1971	16	6,941	1,136	16.4
1971/1972	41	15,332	1,950	12.7
1972/1973	68	24,481	4,072	16.6
1973/1974	110	34,830	7,658	22.0
1980/1981	373	106,032	35,190	33.2
1990/1991	830	387,000	170,994	44.2
1995/1996	953	506,543	236,331	46.7
2000/2001	993	554,845	270,344	48.7
2002/2003	1,022	578,003	280,161	48.5
2003/2004	1,025	576,472	279,180	48.4
2004/2005	1,041	572,864	277,400	48.4
2005/2006	1,046	568,074	275,597	48.5
2006/2007	1,053	563,602	274,132	49.0
2009/2010	1,418	531,393	261,249	49.2
2015/2016	1,647	724,395	354,926	48.9

Sources: Ministry of Development, Statistical Year Book 1973; Ministry of National Economy, Statistical Year Books 1990, 2001, 2005; 2007, 2011, 2016 and Ministry of Education Statistical Year Book 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2016.

The proportion of female students in the general education fell from 16.4 percent in 1970/1971 to 12.7 percent in 1971/1972 because the Omani families still did not recognize the importance of female education. Then it increased to 16.6 percent in the next academic year 1972/1973 and to 33.2 percent in 1980/1981. It continued to increase and reached 49 percent in 2006/2007, representing a four-fold increase in thirty years (see Figure 6 below). It is stable with 49 percent in 2009/2010 and 2015/2016. Net enrolment ratio of females in 2000 is almost equivalent to that of males in the primary and preparatory education. However, in secondary education, the enrolment ratio of females at 57.7 percent is higher than that for male students at 46.5 percent. In 2005 the net enrolment ratio of females is almost equivalent to that of males in primary education. However, in the preparatory and secondary education the enrolment ratio of male students (52.6 percent & 51.8 percent) is higher than that for females (47.4 percent & 48.2 percent respectively).

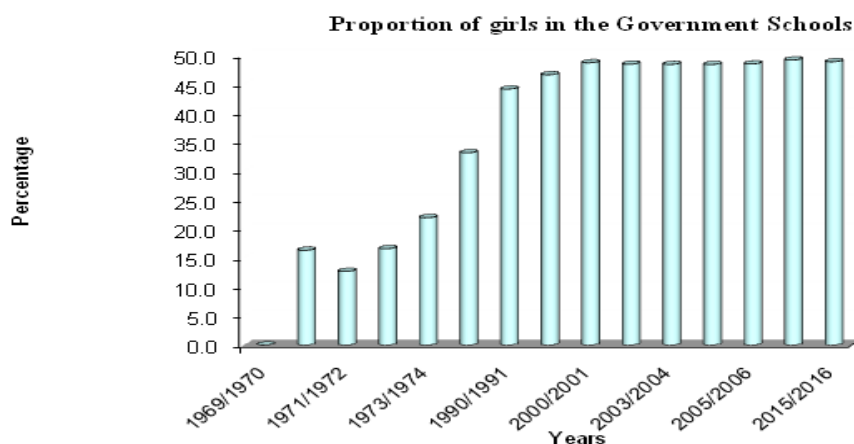


Figure6. Proportion of girls in government schools

In November 1982, the foundation-stone for the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) was laid and in the academic year 1986/1987, it received its first intake of students. Initially, the University had five colleges: Education and Islamic studies, Medicine, Engineering, Sciences, Law and Agriculture. Today, there are eight colleges which offer degrees in 52 different subjects. The government subsidizes the study fees, books, food and on-campus accommodation, as well as public transport to and from the University. In 2006 females comprised 57 percent of the total number of graduates from SQU as against 43.5 percent in 1990—the year in which the first cohort graduated. Despite the increase in the number of female students in university education (which is certainly positive progress), it is quite striking that most of these students opt for the Arts. The same pattern applies to female students in private colleges (thirteen colleges, ten of which are in Muscat) and in colleges or universities outside Oman. Female students account for 40 percent of total students in private colleges at home and 60 percent in colleges abroad. Technical colleges offer a wide range of educational and training programmes. The ratio of female students admitted to technical colleges during the period 1995/1996 to 2006/2007 did not exceed 30 percent against 70 percent for males, whilst female graduates from these colleges accounted for 40 percent of total graduates as opposed to 60 percent for male graduates. This means that males make up the majority of graduates from such colleges, and this merits a study to identify why females refrain from joining these kinds of educational and training programmes.

The available data indicate that women take greater advantage of illiteracy eradication and adult education programmes than do men. The percentage of females enrolled in illiteracy eradication programmes in 1999/2000 amounted to 93 percent, and females made up 70 percent of those freed from the restrictions of illiteracy during the twenty-six year period from 1973/1974 to 1999/2000. The female students enrolled in adult education represented 85 percent at the primary level, 47 percent at the preparatory level and 50 percent at the secondary level in 1999/2000 (MOE 2001). The educational system in Oman has achieved a significant qualitative improvement in the last three decades at various levels especially as regards the illiteracy rate. According to the 1993 census there was obvious variation in the illiteracy ratio between Omani males and females. It was only 28.9 percent among males, but 53.9 percent among females. The gap in the illiteracy ratio between Omani males and females is decreasing, as shown in Figure 7 and 8.

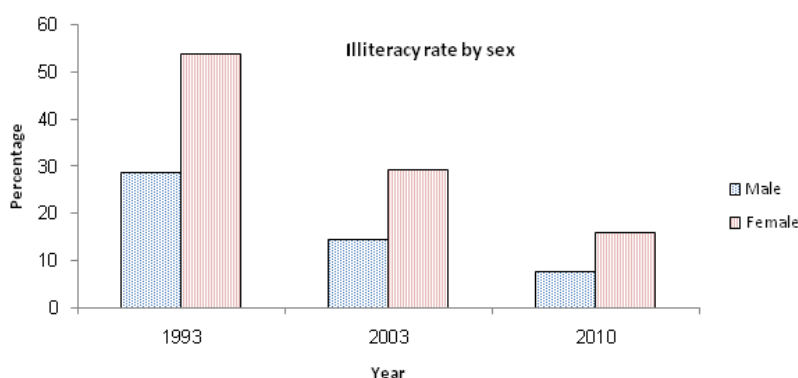


Figure7. Illiteracy rate by sex

Source: Oman censuses 1993, 2003 & 2010.

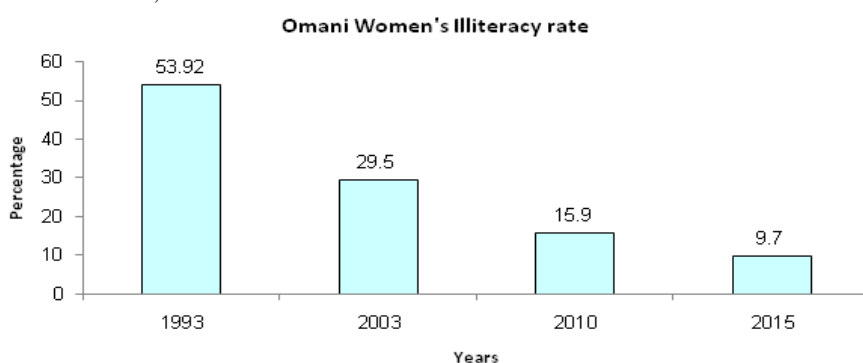


Figure8. Omani Women's Illiteracy rate

Source: Oman censuses 1993, 2003 & 2010 and NCSI Statistical Year Book 2016.

Figure (9) shows that around 53.92 percent of women were illiterate in 1993, whilst the percentage decreased to 29.45 in 2003 and to 15.9 in 2010. In 1993 the census shows that some 5.46 percent of women had secondary schooling; this percentage for women had increased in 2010 to 26.2 percent. The percentage of women having a university degree in 1993 was 0.7 percent, increased to 3.42 percent in 2003 and to 7.9 percent in 2010.

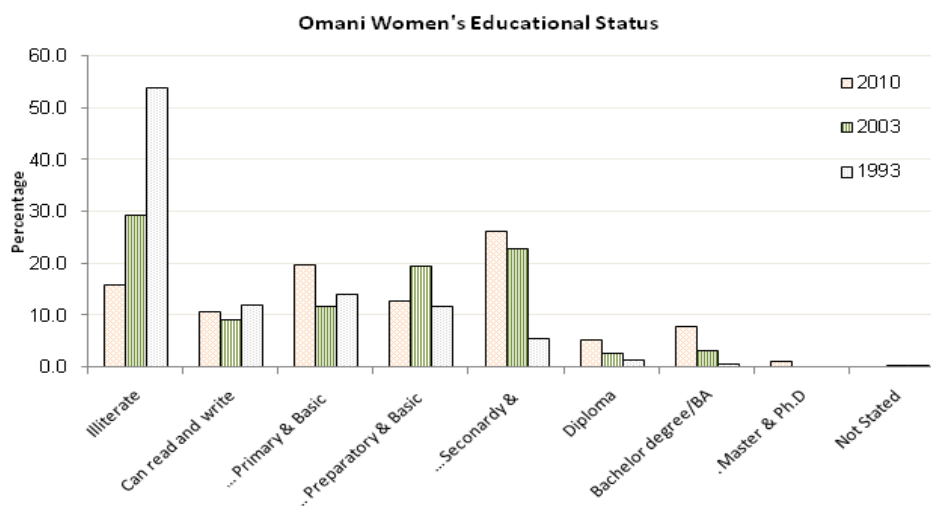


Figure9. Percentage distribution of Omani women population (15 years+) by educational status

Source: Oman censuses 1993, 2003 & 2010.

A recent study of female educational issues has particular relevance for the current research. In a visit to Oman in 2004 Shapour Rassekh of the International Bureau of Education (an agency of UNESCO) collected data for a study that was published in the same year under the title *Education as a Motor for Development: Recent education reforms in Oman with particular reference to the status of women and girls*. Rassekh examined the recent education reforms in Oman and commended the very considerable efforts undertaken over the past three-and-a-half decades in building an education system to meet the needs of the people of the country and to ensure its ongoing development (Rassekh 2004:26). He highlighted what he described as the impressive advances made in the education of women and girls as a priority of educational policy (Rassekh 2004:31–32). Numerous other improvements have taken place in the structure of the school system, in curriculum and textbook development, student assessment, special education provision, teacher education and physical conditions of schools, indicating the significant investment that the government has made and continues to make in educational provision (Rassekh 2004:15–24). At the conclusion of his study, Rassekh made several recommendations:

- The process of democratization should be accelerated.
- More encouragement should be provided for Omanis to develop their entrepreneurial capacities and enter the private sector in larger numbers.
- Higher education institutions should receive greater impetus to invest in research and development projects and the best university graduates should be guided in that direction.
- The present school-reform drive should continue through to the final grade of secondary education, always hand in hand with the necessary monitoring and evaluation efforts.
- More women should be encouraged to enter technical education in a diversity of fields.
- A better orientation of students abroad should be made in the light of the priority needs of the country for highly-qualified individuals.
- Oman needs the establishment of an education and employment development plan organized by the Higher Education Council or a similar institution, carefully implemented and regularly adjusted and updated. In this process Oman should co-operate with other countries of the region in order to better use the complementary resources of each country for the benefit of all.

Whilst Rassekh's study covers female education reforms, it completely ignores the consequences of women's education for their social mobility, and this is one of the most outstanding features of the changes in the circumstances of educated females. Omani women are experiencing a remarkable transition from tradition to modernity. Priyanka Sacheti reveals how Omani families are giving encouragement and support to Omani daughters to pursue higher studies and careers. Sacheti stated that despite the rise in parental endorsement of the choice of untraditional subjects by their daughters, there is still a societal predilection that pressures women to be teachers and doctors. Nonetheless, Omani women are marrying later in order that they can pursue educational and career goals whilst support afforded by families can include the selling of assets to enable daughters to study overseas. Most importantly, Sacheti successfully disputes the western portrayal of Omani women as oppressed and condemned to the home by their families (Sacheti 2007).

4.5. Employment

In her study entitled *Omani women's enrolment in work and changing traditional roles in the Sultanate of Oman*, Al-Musalami (1995) dealt with two main issues: the impact of women's work on their changing roles in society, and the importance of women's enrolment in the work-force as part of the national process of development. The data were collected by the author through a questionnaire covering a random sample of 200 women working in different government institutions in the Muscat Governorate. She concluded her study with the following findings:

- The increase in the education of females led to an increase in the number of women in the labour-force and to greater numbers of women in professional occupations;
- The major factor which influenced women's decision to seek employment was economic—they wanted to increase their family income;
- Working women supported the idea of later marriage and smaller families; and finally
- Women preferred educational positions to other kinds of employment.

The author made the following recommendations:

- Job-opportunities for women should be increased and women should be provided with a wider range of professional skills;
- Working women should benefit from relevant facilities such as transport and kindergarten for their children;
- Mass media should increase social awareness regarding the enrolment of women in the work-force and the effect of this trend on women themselves, and on families and society.

The study by Al-Musalami contributed to only one dimension that makes up the framework of the present study. However the current study for which the sample is drawn solely from graduate women compares well in terms of compatibility with the choice by Al-Musalami of a sample of 200 women having different levels of education and working solely in the government sector.

In his article "*Gender issues in teacher development: Career choice and commitment in Oman*", Auhoud Al-Belushi (2004) discussed the role of gender in the career choice, commitment and professional development of female teachers in Oman. Al-Belushi identified teaching and medicine as being considered the most suitable fields for Omani females, even despite the fact that the longer duration and greater difficulty of medical training, together with the significantly more demanding nature of the job, mean that many females have little real choice in the matter, as circumstances dictate that they will not be able to generate the opportunities they need to achieve their ambition. On the other hand, Omani females go into teaching for many reasons such as family pressure, social traditions, and extrinsic factors such as immediate placement and attractive working conditions, including the salary and long holidays.

Omani society is deeply conservative, especially within the interior, where people believe in the value, and indeed desirability, of sexual segregation, opposing any idea of a mixed work-place. Thus parents endeavour to find jobs for daughters that fit in with the dominant domestic pattern. Because teaching is regarded as undemanding and as compatible with domesticity, females are encouraged to become teachers owing to this perception of job-compatibility. Being a teacher is seen as appropriate

and convenient for a woman because of the pattern of daily work-schedules and in view of the long holidays that allow teachers to spend more time with their children than might be possible in other occupations. Hence many Omani men think of finding a teacher as a prospective wife when they consider marriage, since the education system balances the equation—extra family income and also maintaining tradition.

Al-Belushi found that there is a strong association between tradition and gender roles for taking up teaching and for leaving the profession. Those who joined teaching for socio-cultural reasons were more likely to think of leaving than those who joined for intrinsic motives. Single teachers were more interested in their pedagogic roles, while married teachers with children appeared not to have either enough time or energy for both roles—career and children. They felt guilty about having to leave their children with someone else when they went to work. He also found that, on the whole, nannies tend to be drawn from poorly-educated groups with different cultural, religious and social backgrounds, whilst nurseries and kindergartens are very few, relatively expensive and poorly regulated. Although Al-Belushi covered most of the aspects that this study tries to examine, his sample concentrated only on females who were teachers. This study will not be limited to the category of teachers, as various categories of posts are occupied by Omani women today.

In a later study, *Paradigm Shift: A Perspective on Omani Women in Management in the Sultanate of Oman*, Al-Lamki (1999) discussed the role of Omani women in management positions in the Sultanate. She highlighted factors that encourage women to pursue careers in management and the obstacles that hold back women's progress, and finally recommended certain steps that need to be taken to help Omani women achieve greater improvements in self-development, career and lifestyle. The study by Al-Lamki confirmed the progress of educated Omani women from traditional roles to modern gender roles and status. The main obstacles that impede Omani women's progress in management careers spring from cultural and traditional values, as well as from societal stereotypes regarding the status and role of women in Arab-Islamic societies. First of all, there remain the cultural perceptions of women's roles in society that have long been shaped by the view of a woman solely in terms of being a domesticated wife and mother whose primary responsibility is towards the family. This traditional attitude tends to have an effect on women's position in the work-force, with its associated views regarding women as being incompetent and ill-prepared for positions of responsibility, especially in the field of management. Secondly, limited access to higher education has impeded the career - development of women. Third, the absence of specifically-targeted policies and legislation means that there is no provision or structures to ensure the participation of women in management. Finally, women's progress in this and other spheres of professional employment is being held back by the lack of professional management training programmes for women, by the lack of professional networking, and by the lack of female role-models. Al-Lamki made the following points relative to the promotion of Omani women into management positions:

- The government should continue its efforts to maintain and sustain equal access to educational opportunities at levels of the educational system. It should encourage and promote female access to scientific, managerial, technical, and vocational disciplines in order to develop the requisite skills and extend their opportunities for employment in non-traditional occupations.
- There is a need to significantly change the traditional attitudes and mental stereotypes of senior male managers who are apt not to take women managers' careers seriously. Also special efforts are needed to modify these attitudes through social awareness programmes promoting the legal right of women to study, work, and participate in all aspects of development at all levels.
- There is a need to promote and encourage Omani women to join the work-force through a mechanism of affirmative action and equality of job-opportunities. Thus it is necessary to institute awareness programmes of employment opportunities and benefits for Omani women in all the different regions of Oman.
- Human Resource Policies and Strategies should be established to execute and orchestrate the recruitment, training, development and promotion of Omani women to management positions.
- The General Directorate for Women's and Children's Affairs along with the Omani Women's Society should play a proactive role in encouraging and promoting professional Omani

women through awareness of female role-models in leadership positions, organizing professional management and leadership training programmes, and establishing a network for Omani women in management (for example, Omani Women Management Society).

- Special attention should be directed to the provision of a social infrastructure that will enable women to work, such as professional day-care centres on-site, kindergartens, and the provision of adequate maternity leave.

Al-Harthy (2000) found that the labour participation rate of Omani women is limited by several factors such as accessibility of education, female educational attainment and the availability of suitable employment that is conducive to child-rearing, marital status and the number of children women bear. He also found that participation rates for Omani women tend to increase among those women who are without children or who have older children. In the same vein, Al-Belushi (2004) found that Omani married females tend to leave the workforce early due to social and familial constraints and pressures that act as disincentives.

Omani working women are highly motivated to achieve and are willing to confront challenging work environments. Al-Lamky (2004) examined Omani women's work experiences and challenges in the public and private sectors. She found that women's employment in Oman was concentrated in the areas of health and education, as well as in low-paying junior jobs in the service sector. Despite the limitations imposed by social pressures on women's career and education paths, Omani women perceived their work environments to be non-discriminatory, supportive and equitable. Women felt that they received the same rewards and general level of support from their managers towards their growth and development as did their male colleagues.

However, working women are beginning to have to depend on resources outside of the traditional family to help care for their children during employment. There is a rise in the use of South-East Asian maids and nannies (mostly Indian), and it is almost inevitable that the children's socialization, faith, beliefs and language will be influenced in ways that differ from those of the Omani tradition (Al-Harthy 2000). Al-Lamky (2004) noted that the majority of Omani working women expressed a sense of guilt for being away from home for long hours. There was also a profound sense of suffering fatigue and being disinclined to do other things after work. Although Omani women are experiencing an increase of status owing to education and careers, they are also taking note of the changing family dynamics and the impact that working has on their physical well-being.

4.5.1. Omani Women in the Labour Market

Women's participation in the labour market has grown consistently since 1970. According to the National Human Development Report 2003 the rate of participation by Omani women in economic activity rose from 3.2 percent in 1993 to 11.2 percent in 2003 and to 34.8 percent in 2015, while male participation increased from 33 percent to 38.2 percent and to 49.7 percent respectively (Figure 10).

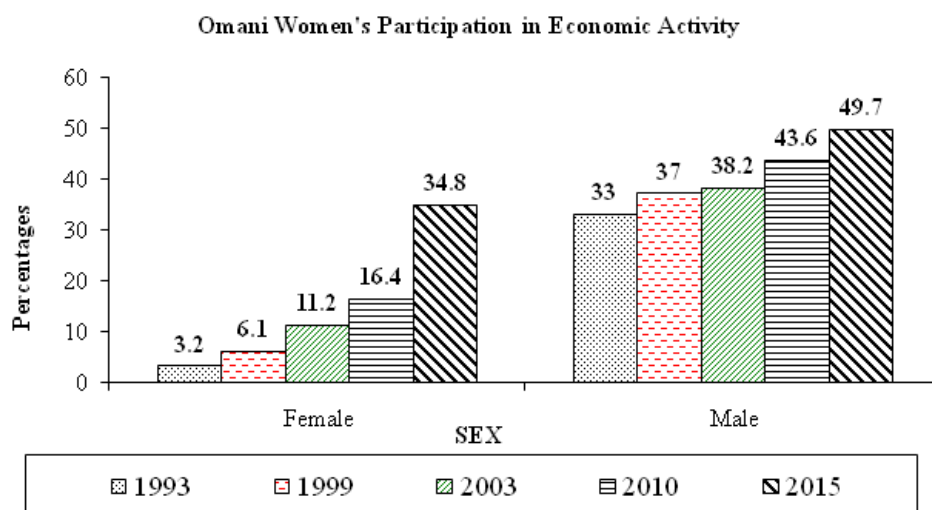


Figure10. Women's participation in economic activity

Source: Oman National Human Development Report 2003 and NCSI Statistical Year Book 2016.

It is noted that 66.6 percent of employed Omani women were working in the government sector and 33.4 percent in the private sector in 2003. This proportion has changed in 2016 where 58.2 percent of employed Omani women were working in the government sector and 41.8 percent in the private sector. The proportion of Omani women in the government-sector labour force increased from 6.3 percent in 1980 to 13.5 percent in 1990 to 29.2 percent in 2000 to 42.7 in 2010 and to 46.9 percent in 2015. Women are mainly engaged in the government’s education, health, social work and services sectors, whilst in the private sector women are concentrated in clerical support services and sales jobs (see Table 2).

Table2. Employment in the government sector 1980–2015

Year	Civil Service Employees (Omani)			Female (percent)
	Male	Female	Total	
1980	20,261	1,364	21,625	6.3
1985	30,941	2,831	33,772	8.4
1990	38,099	5,925	44,024	13.5
1993	44,722	9,269	53,991	17.2
1995	47,535	12,193	59,728	20.4
2000	45,293	18,641	63,934	29.2
2003	51,886	27,213	79,099	34.4
2004	53,886	29,997	83,883	35.8
2006	57,703	35,804	93,507	38.3
2010	65,455	48,751	114,206	42.7
2015	82,705	73,056	155,761	46.9

Source: Ministry of National Economy, Statistical Year Books 2007 and NCSI Statistical Year Book 2016.

The three censuses results show that the participation of Omani women in the labour force increased from 6.7 percent of females aged 15 years and above in 1993 to 18.7 percent in 2003 to 42.7 percent in 2010, as seen in Figure (11).

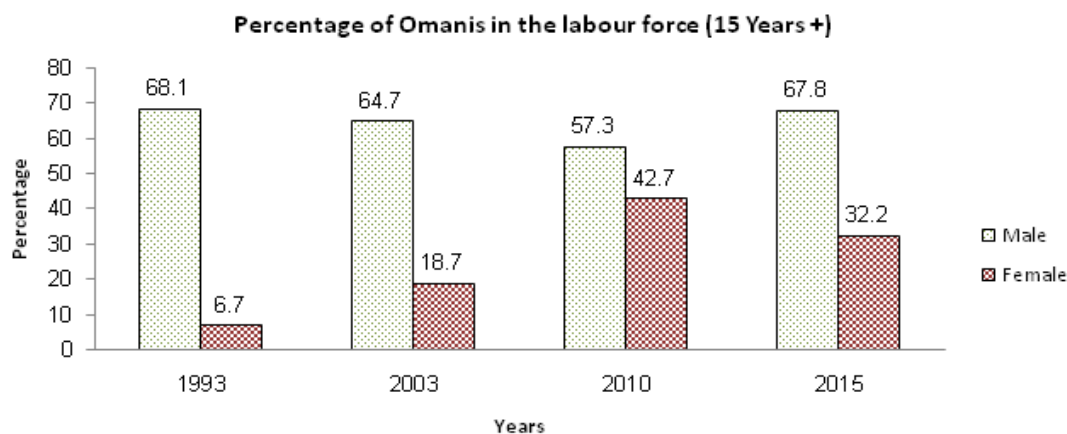


Figure11. Percentage of Omanis in the labour force (15 Years +)

Source: Oman censuses 1993, 2003& 2010and NCSI Statistical Year Book 2016.

4.6. Marital Status

Generally in Oman marriage is commonly contracted between first cousins or at least between men and women who share a blood relationship. The Oman Family Health Survey (OFHS 1995) reported about 54 percent of ever-married women under 50 years of age as having shared a blood-relationship with their husbands before marriage (34 percent were first cousins and 20 percent other relations). It is still predominantly true for Omani society that age-at-marriage is simultaneously the age at which the first sexual relations experienced by both parties begin, and when the couples become exposed to the risk of generating offspring. The proportion of ever-married women of ages 20–24 stands at 57 percent in urban areas, increasing to a high of 71 percent in rural areas, while the proportion of ever-married men of ages 25–29 is 67 percent in urban areas and 74 percent in rural areas.

The survey also showed there is a positive association between education and the timing of the first marriage, which is influenced by the number of years of school/college attendance. The longer the time spent in full-time education, the later is the entry into marriage. For example, as Table (3) indicates, the

proportion of ever-married women at ages 15–19 declined slightly from a high of 39 percent among women with no schooling, to 37 percent among those with incomplete primary education and fell drastically to just 18 percent among those with completed primary education. Further, the OFHS survey proves that there was a very sharp decline in marriages contracted at a very early age. The proportion of ever-married women who first married before reaching age 15 was over 75 percent amongst those currently in the age-band 35–49 years. This proportion continued to decline gradually until it reached a low of five percent amongst women currently in the age-band 15–19 years. These figures indicate a substantial shift towards later marriage and a concomitant tendency for age-at-first-marriage to become spread over a wider age-range. Thus, the proportion of women who entered first marriage before reaching age 25 has slipped from over 98 percent among women currently aged 35–49 years to 89 percent for women currently aged 25–29 years.

The indications are clear that the effect of education on empowerment and lifestyle choice are having their effect in enabling Omani women to take their place in the development of their country in accordance with their own desires and ambitions, and the encouragement and policy objectives of the government. In this case government policy and personal preference are seen to work towards the same goals.

Table3. Percentage of ever-married women by age, residence and education 1995

Background characteristic	Age						
	15–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49
Women							
<i>Residence</i>							
Urban	13.8	56.7	88.0	96.4	99.1	99.0	99.3
Rural	18.8	71.1	95.8	99.5	99.3	99.6	100.0
<i>Education</i>							
Illiterate	39.3	86.2	96.6	98.3	99.3	99.7	99.5
Some primary	36.9	84.5	95.7	98.3	99.5	98.9	100.0
Primary	17.7	77.4	92.6	96.5	97.9	100.0	100.0
Preparatory	7.6	54.0	85.0	97.4	94.7	77.8	100.0
Secondary	10.2	34.3	72.1	87.3	100.0	87.5	100.0
University	0	36.2	63.4	91.3	100.0	100.0	*
Total	15.4	61.2	90.3	97.5	99.2	99.2	99.5
Men							
<i>Residence</i>							
Urban	0.9	20.4	67.2	89.6	94.5	98.1	98.0
Rural	2.0	26.9	74.0	94.9	96.0	97.0	98.5
<i>Education</i>							
Illiterate	18.2	32.4	66.2	90.5	99.3	99.7	99.5
Some primary	2.8	29.1	67.1	90.0	99.5	98.9	100.0
Primary	1.3	33.2	72.5	90.9	97.9	100.0	100.0
Preparatory	0.8	19.9	74.7	94.2	94.7	77.8	100.0
Secondary	1.2	15.0	63.1	90.4	100.0	87.5	100.0
University	0.0	20.0	69.6	95.9	100.0	100.0	*
Total	1.3	22.4	69.2	91.3	95.0	97.7	98.2

* Figure is based on fewer than 25 cases and had been suppressed.

Source: Oman Family Health Survey 1995.

Table4. Percentage of Omani Women by their marital status, residence (1993, 2003, 2010)

Years	Marital Status	Urban	Rural
1993	Single	27.7	18.2
	Married	58.2	66.7
	Divorced	3.9	4
	Widowed	9.7	10.7
	Total	100	100
2003	Single	43.3	38.6
	Married	46.2	50
	Divorced	2.9	2.8

	Widowed	7.3	8.2
	Total	100	100
2010	Single	39.7	39.2
	Married	50.6	51
	Divorced	2.6	2.4
	Widowed	6.9	7.3
	Total	100	100

Source: Oman censuses 1993, 2003& 2010

We can noticed from Table (4) that the highest proportion of Omani women who have never been married (43.3) was in 2003 in the urban areas. while in the rural areas, their percentage is been increasing from 18.2% in 1993 to 38.6% in 2003 to 39.2% in 2010. This is due to several social factors, including females' education, delayed marriage age. The percentage of married women in the villages is higher than that of urban areas. The highest percentage was recorded in 1993 (66.7%) and this as a result of the traditions and the customs of the Omani society that encourage marriage specially for the females who are (18-25) years old. Also the low percentage of educated women in that period and the increase in the illiteracy rate in the rural compared to urban areas. The rate of divorce in urban and rural areas has decreased remarkably as a result of changing in the social life of Omanis.

4.7. Education and Marriage

The 1993 census showed there has been a very sharp decline in marriages at a very early age. The proportion of unmarried women was 78.84 percent in the age-band 15–19 years and it increased to 96.09 percent in 2003, while the illiteracy rate for the same age-group was 8.42 percent. The percentage of those who first married in the age-group 15–19 years was 20.17 percent. This proportion continued to decline gradually until it reached a low of four percent amongst women who were in the age-band 15–19 years in 2003. These figures indicate a substantial shift towards later marriage and a concomitant tendency for age-at-first-marriage to become spread over a wider age-range, as shown in Tables 6 and 7 on the next page.

As is normal for all populations, there is a positive association between education and the number children ever-born. The major increase in education, particularly female education, appears to be directly related to the decrease in the mean of number children ever-born. The longer the time that is spent in school, the later is the entry into marriage and this leads to a reduction in the mean of number children ever-born.

Table5. Mean of number of children ever-born alive by educational level

Educational Level	Mean of Children ever-born alive 2003
Illiterate	7.36
Primary	5.04
Preparatory	4.60
Secondary	4.01
Intermediate Technical Institutes	3.41
University	3.56
Postgraduate Studies	2.41
Total	4.25

Source: Oman census 2003& 2010.

Table (5) shows the mean number children ever-born by education level. Women with no education have the highest mean at almost 7.4 births. Women with primary level have the next highest mean at slightly over 5.0 births and the lowest pertains to those with postgraduate level education, at just over 2.4 births.

Table6. Omani women (15 Years +) by age-group and marital status in 1993 and 2003

Age-group	Unmarried		Married		Divorced		Widowed		Not Stated		Total	
	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003
15-19	78.84	96.09	20.17	3.69	0.84	0.13	0.06	0.02	0.1	0.07	100	100
20-24	28.15	68.64	68.28	30.17	2.98	0.92	0.41	0.14	0.18	0.14	100	100
25-29	6.54	27.25	88.15	69.29	4	2.62	1.19	0.65	0.12	0.18	100	100

Omani Women's Empowerment within Decades

30-34	2.04	8.87	91.71	84.81	3.73	4.42	2.42	1.78	0.11	0.12	100	100
35-39	1.06	3.06	90.79	88.25	3.49	4.84	4.55	3.71	0.1	0.14	100	100
40-45	0.94	1.44	85.78	86.15	4.43	4.65	8.54	7.55	0.31	0.21	100	100
45-49	0.84	0.86	79.07	81.1	5.64	4.68	13.87	13.12	0.59	0.25	100	100
50+	1.21	1.03	46.2	51.61	8.4	6.97	42.23	38.85	1.96	1.54	100	100

Source: Oman censuses 1993 & 2003.

Table 7. Omani women (15 Years +) by age-group and educational status in 1993 and 2003

Age-group	Illiterate		Read/write		Primary		Preparatory		Secondary		Intermediate Technical Institutes		University		Master		PhD		Not Stated		Total
	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	1993	2003	
15-19	8.42	5.15	12.3	7.52	35.75	4.01	0	18.5	6.84	57.96	0.1	2.96	0.00	3.83	0	0	0	0	0.06	0.06	100
20-24	22.79	9.65	19.1	8.07	19.21	6.29	1.72	10.4	18.5	40.78	6.1	4.71	1.72	20.1	0.0	0	0	0	0.14	0.11	100
25-29	45.32	19.31	23.1	9.83	14.08	10.7	2.18	13	5.7	31.51	3.85	5.71	2.18	9.66	0.04	0.02	0.01	0	0.18	0.22	100
30-34	68.16	68.3	17.4	17.4	7.04	7.06	1.16	2.39	2.28	2.28	1.26	1.27	1.16	1.17	0.07	0.07	0.02	0.02	0.21	0	100
35-39	82.26	82.46	10.7	10.7	3.41	3.42	0.52	1.17	1.17	1.17	0.46	0.46	0.52	0.52	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.24	0	100
40-45	90.26	90.26	6.2	6.2	1.13	1.13	0.3	0.53	0.62	0.62	0.36	0.36	0.3	0.3	0.07	0.07	0.02	0.02	0.52	0.52	100
45-49	93.64	93.64	4.1	4.1	0.46	0.46	0.18	0.24	0.31	0.31	0.16	0.16	0.1	0.1	0.04	0.04	0	0	0.83	0.83	100
50+	96.63	96.63	1.9	1.9	0.2	0.2	0.05	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.05	0.05	0.01	0.01	0	0	0.93	0.93	100

Source: Oman censuses 1993 & 2003.

4.8. Childbearing

The Omani people traditionally prize children as signs of social strength. These children fill emotional needs and care for aging parents in later life: parents look to their sons to work and help them deal with an increasingly complex world. They need their daughters to build and sustain social ties within the community. Within Oman today, there is a modernizing view that, taking world population research into account, regards the Omani population growth as still extremely high by world standards and which would seek to reduce the number of childbirths (preferably by natural means) accordingly. On the other hand, there remain many people who would not accept this 'world-view' and, because the social fabric of extended families is still so cohesive within Oman, tensions caused by the conflict of family loyalties and personal aspirations will inevitably play themselves out amongst the new generations of Omanis. This study seeks to make some contribution to the literature on this subject by examining the *attitudes* of respondents as well as their personal circumstances.

In the societies of the Arabian Peninsula similar arguments about women assuming active roles in birth-control have been obscured by the often-polemical literature concerning the roles of women in Islamic societies. Eickelman (1993) refers to the argument that demographers and historians have advanced since the 1970s regarding the ability of women and men in pre-modern European societies and in contemporary Third-World countries to avail themselves of reproductive control through direct and indirect practices. Direct practices include contraceptive birth-control, abortion, infanticide, and child-abandonment. Indirect practices include abstinence from sexual relations until a child is weaned and late marriage. Until lately, demographers attributed the continuing active high birth-rates in Middle Eastern countries to the persistence of a fertility-pattern no longer restricted by a high infant and child mortality rates. Eickelman visited one of Oman's provinces on two separate occasions (during 1979/1980 and in 1988) and found that women in 1988 discussed fertility and birth in ways significantly different than they had previously. Women often concealed their concerns and anxieties about fertility-related issues by discussing them in a joking manner during the earlier period, while in 1988 topics such as the value of girls as compared to boys, family size and sterility generated lively debate among women. From these conversations Eickelman discovered a most surprising aspect in the statement by several women that

they wanted as many as twenty children. Many women had already given birth to four or five children in the space of eight years. Against this social background it is readily understandable why people have four, five, or six children and why many Omani women desire to prolong their years of fecundity. Eickelman remarked that issues such as a decrease in natural resources would not give sufficient motivation to the individual to make personal choices regarding reduction of family size, especially when education, medical care and social services were perceived as cost-free. He also observed that there were no indications that married couples actively discussed the options open to them and their social implications. On the other hand, although Oman does not have an official family-planning policy (in terms of regulation or coercive measures), the means of modern birth-control are freely available in pharmacies in the urban areas and from private clinics and doctors who encourage women to space their births. This stands in contrast to the situation in Saudi Arabia, where the sale of contraceptives is banned.

The Oman Family Health Survey (OFHS) of 1995 focused on completed fertility and on cumulative fertility for certain segments of the women's reproductive period. It presented three measures of current fertility: the proportion of women currently pregnant, age-specific fertility rates and total fertility rates. The results published in the OFHS Report (1995) show that a substantial improvement in educational attainment for both males and females had its correlation in every instance with improvement in personal and family health, employment and career prospects, and social and national development. OFHS was able to report that fertility varies not only with age and duration of marriage, but also with area of residence (i.e. rural versus urban), type of marriage (monogamous or polygamous), level of educational attainment, occupation, religion and many other factors. The TFR was found to be 6.6 births in urban areas, rising to 7.9 births in rural areas. The TFR has seen a much greater decline in urban areas than in rural areas. The level of current fertility varies by region of residence. Muscat has the lowest fertility at 5.1 children per woman. Dhofar and Ash-Sharqiyah belong to an intermediate group, with 6.6 and 7.1 children per woman respectively. Next comes Ad-Dakhiliyah with a TFR of 7.4 births per woman, whilst the highest fertility rate of 7.7 births per woman is found in Al-Batinah and Adh-Dhahirah. When we compare the TFR with the mean number of children ever-born to all women aged 40–49 years we will see that all regions in Oman have contributed to the recent decline in fertility. For example, in Muscat the total fertility rate was reduced by 3.2 births during the period 1993–1995. The reduction in fertility in the other regions was of the order of 1.2–1.4 births in absolute terms or 14–17 percent in relative terms (see Figures 3.12 and 3.13).

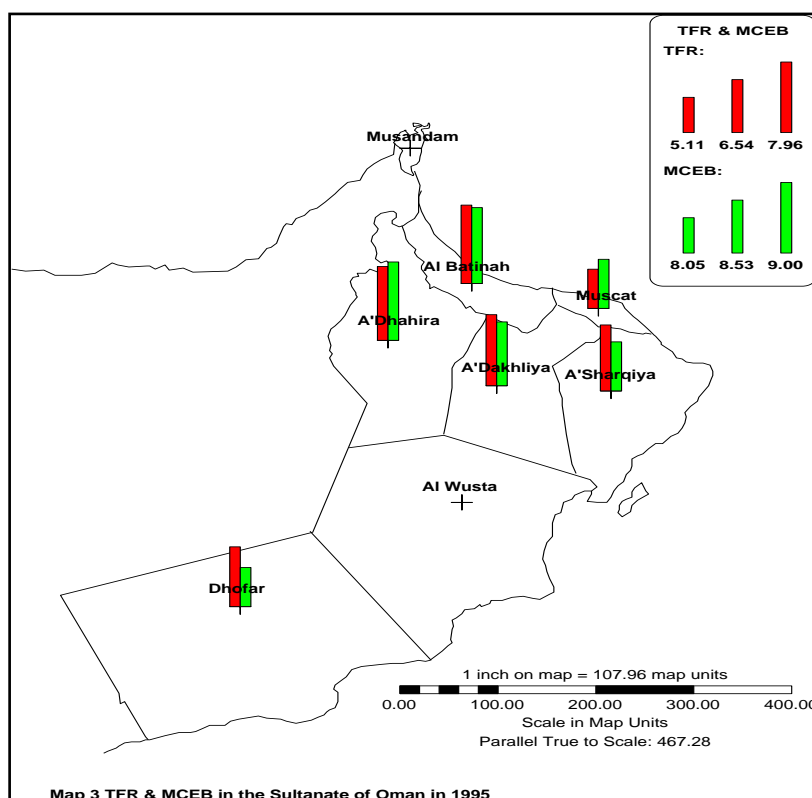


Figure 12. Total Fertility Rate and Mean Children Ever Born in Oman in 1995.

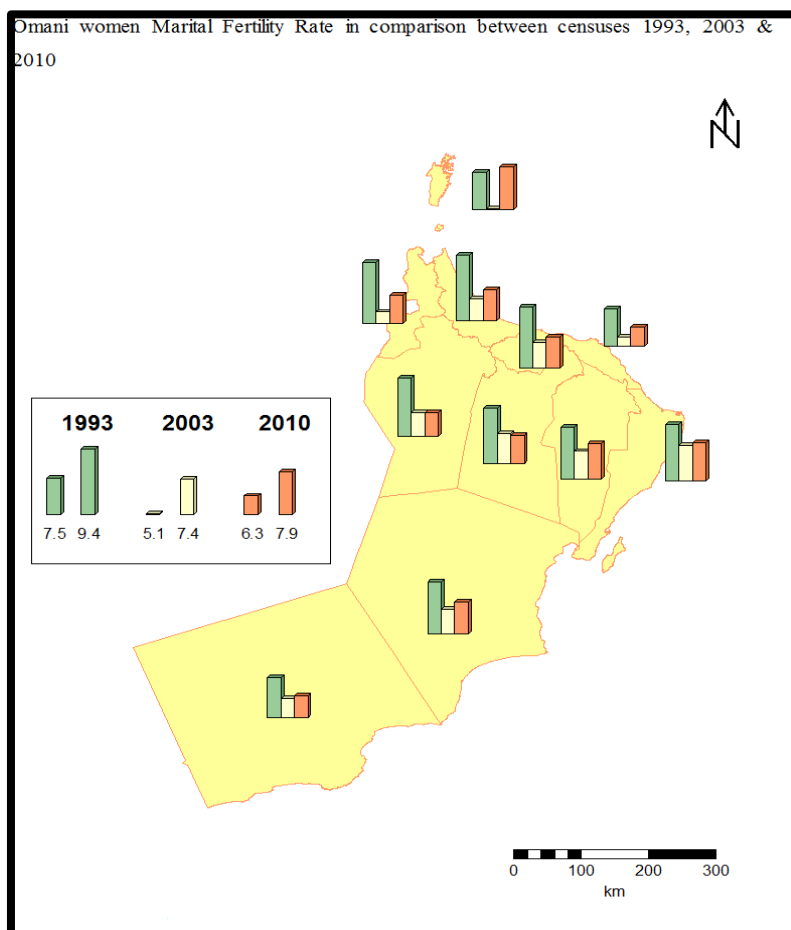


Figure13. Total Fertility Rate in Oman in 1993, 2003 & 2010

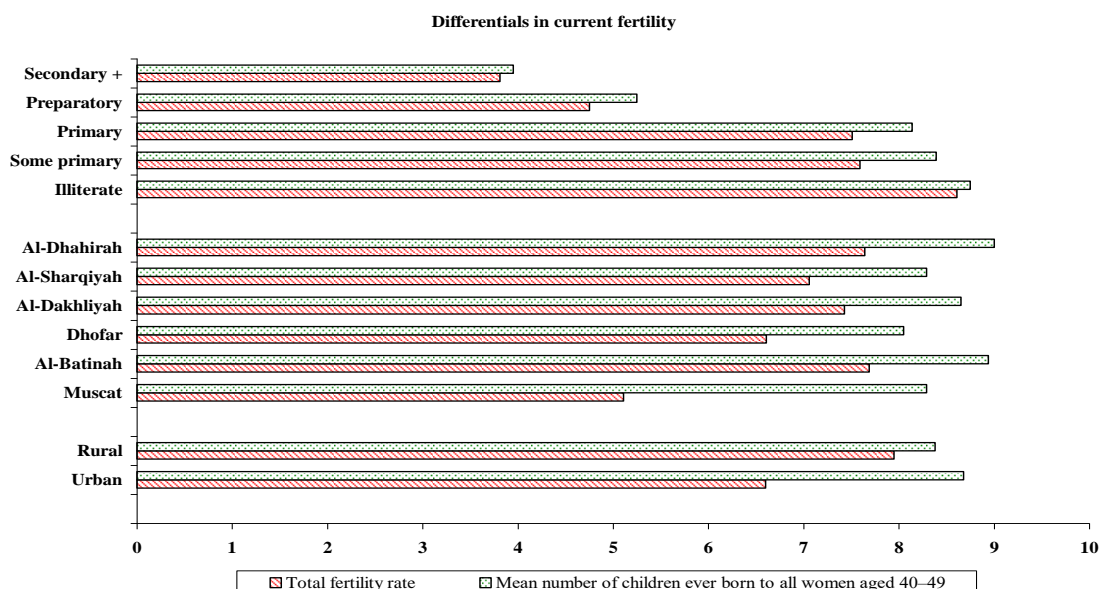


Figure14. Total fertility rates for the three years preceding the survey and the mean number of children ever-born to all women at ages 40-49, by residence and education

Source: Oman Family Health Survey 1995.

Educational attainment has affected the total fertility rate. The more education people receive, the more amenable they become to notions of family planning and birth-control. The major increase in education, particularly female education, appears to be directly related to the decrease in the total fertility rate. The Oman Family Health Survey found that the greatest drop in fertility levels (3.8 births) was amongst those with secondary or higher education, as is shown in Figure (14). There is an association between

level of maternal education and fertility. The highest fertility was observed for women who had no schooling (8.6 births), while those with secondary or higher education had the lowest level of fertility (3.8 births). Education is thus negatively associated with fertility; the difference in level of fertility between the lowest and highest educational groups was close to five births in terms of both the completed fertility of women age 40–49 and the TFR for the period 1993–1995. The educational differentials in the age-pattern of fertility suggest that female education effects total fertility through both its influence on age at marriage (which depresses the rates at younger ages) and its influence on fertility regulation within marriage (which affects rates at higher ages).

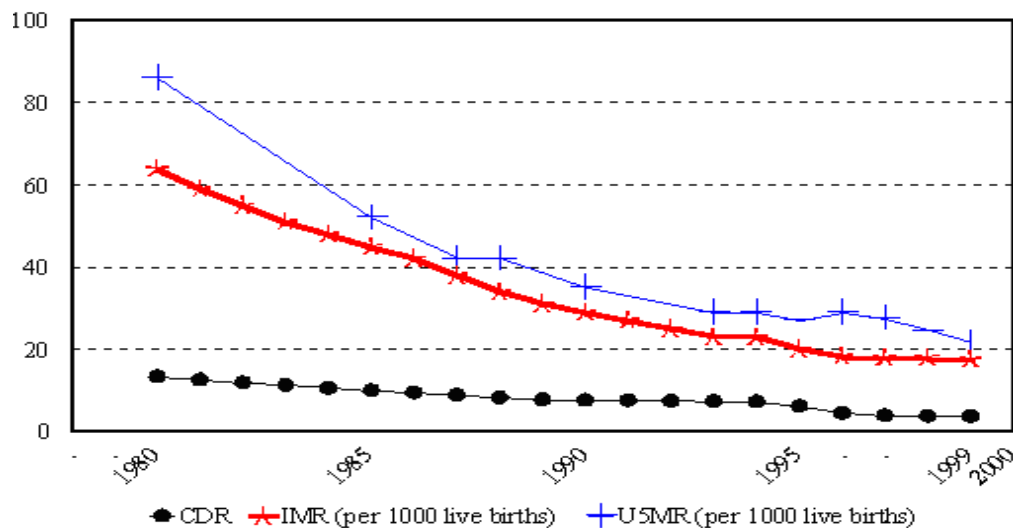


Figure 15. Mortality indicators

Source: MOH Report on Development of Health Services and Health Care 2001

The Ministry of Health (MOH) in 2001 issued a *Report on Development of Health Services and Health Care*. This report showed the improvements in the health status that occurred with great rapidity in Oman, taking much less time than in other developing countries. The most important findings of this report related to the changes in child and infant mortality (as shown in Figure 15) which indicated that instead of being one of the high-mortality countries of the Middle East, in this regard Oman exhibited levels of mortality that were characteristic of countries having a much longer history of development. The crude death-rate has declined to almost one-third during the last 15 years. In the early 1970s, almost 1 in 5 children were dying before their fifth birthday. This declined dramatically to 1 in 20 children during the early 1990s. The mortality-rate for those aged under 5 years was estimated to be 21.5 per 1000 live births during 1999. Fifteen years ago, the life-expectancy at birth in Oman was about 60 years, and increased to 72.5 years in 2000. The increase in the life-expectancy and the decrease in the total fertility rates that occurred in the period 1980 to 2000 show that the Omani population is showing demographic transition towards ageing. The mortality rate for those aged under 5 years was estimated at 21.5 per 1000 live births during 2000. World Mortality Report (2005) estimated the IMR in Oman at 18 per 1000 for the period 2000–2005.

Although fertility levels remain high relative to those in other GCC States, a comparison of the data gathered in the two national censuses (1993 and 2003) indicate that Omani fertility rates have started to decline. As the general availability of free general education for females has been the single major feature in common in the ten-year period preceding each of the national censuses, it is education that appears to be the driver of this incipient change. Several other changes have been set in motion in a host of circumstances relating to Omani females, and many of these changes have a higher visibility and profile than that of fertility decline. The emancipation of females and the general improvement and development of the status of women can be attributed to a range of factors. However, as the first major change to appear generally on the scene was that which has the greatest inertia to be overcome (fertility), there are cogent reasons for arguing that education has been the main driver for the generating changes in the circumstances of Omani females to date. By experiential and empirical evidence education in the developing world has been proved to empower people of all ages and both sexes to understand more clearly their situations and to arrive at decisions for change.

4.9. Women in Leading Positions

Omani women enjoy much more significant levels of political participation than do her counterparts in other GCC countries. Omani women have reached ministerial rank. At present four women in Oman serve as Ministers in the government. His Majesty Sultan of Oman issued a decree in March 2003 appointing the first woman minister in Oman, Aysha Al-Syabia, to the post of Minister without Portfolio in charge of Handicraft Industries. Another decree issued on 08 March 2004 appointed Dr. Rawya Al-Busaidi as Minister for Higher Education. On 26 February 2011, a decree was issued for the appointment of Madiha Al-Shaibani as the Minister of Education.

The first female Under-Secretary was appointed in the 1980s. Today there are four women holding the position of Under-Secretary, with another four women as Consultants. Omani women joined the Diplomatic Corps for the first time in 1975. At the present time there are some twenty female diplomats, two of them holding the post of Ambassador (Table 8). Also a number of women sit as chairpersons on the boards of directors of private companies, as well as others who occupy positions as deputy chairpersons and directors. Omani women have had the right to vote and to stand for election to the Majlis Ash-Shurá (Consultative Council) since 1994. In its second session 1994–1997, two women sat as members and two women out of its 82 members are in the current session. In its eight session 2015-2019 women are represented 1 percent only. In 1997, four women were appointed to the Majlis Ad-Dawlah (State Council) whose 41 members are selected by appointment. Five women were so appointed in 2001 and 15 women were appointed in 2016-2020. The percentage of Omani women who are represented in the Majlis Ad-Dawlah increased from 9.7 percent to 12 percent to 17 percent within that period. In Omani women have also become members of the Municipal Council of the Governorate of Muscat. If we compare Omani women with other Arab women, Oman women are even more advanced than women in countries with a long parliamentary history such as Egypt, where female representation in the elected parliament does not exceed 2.2 percent and 5.7 percent in the Majlis Ash-Shurá (MONE 2003b).

Table 8. Number of Omani women in leading positions

Job	Number of Women 2005	Number of Women 2016
Minister	4	3
Undersecretary in the government	4	2
Consultant	4	20
Ambassador	2	3
General Manager	7	16
School Director	485	539

Source: Ministry of National Economy, Statistical Year Books, 2005 & Ministry of Education, Statistical Year Books 2005 & 2017.

4.10. Women in the Media

Omani women occupy 10 percent of the posts in the Ministry of Information, and in Oman Radio and Television. They also have a visible presence in the press. Omani women participate actively in the preparation and presentation of television and radio programmes that deal with family, women and child affairs. The Ministry of Information runs additional programmes on women's issues along with other programmes that address various aspects of women's lives. Out of eleven programmes only one is prepared by a male, whilst three programmes are jointly prepared and two programmes are co-presented. The rest of the programmes are exclusively prepared and presented by women.

5. CONCLUSION

Since 1970 the Sultanate of Oman has made tremendous progress in developing its potential and raising the standard of living of its people. The most notable development in the Sultanate during the last four decades under the reign of Sultan Qaboos lies in female education, which has led to a social change that involves alterations in the roles that women play within society. The Omani women's life-path has been undergoing development from the traditional role of being a wife and a mother and towards playing an increasingly modern role. A good example that can be cited here is my life-path as compared with that of my mother. I graduated from Sultan Qaboos University in 1997; received a Masters degree from the University of Liverpool in 2001 and received a PhD in 2008. I am a Professor Assistant in SQU. I got married in 2009 and I have two children. The oldest daughter was

born in 2010 and the second son was born in 2014. My mother is a housewife, she cannot read or write, and is married and with ten children.

The various data gathered and summarized in this research highlight the connections between education, the drop in the fertility rate, the increase in child and family health, stability in marriage, employment/employability, and the trend towards later age of marriage. The possession of an education is seen to result in improved circumstances in other aspects of life. The possession of an education also encourages persons to marry at a later age than they otherwise would. As for the status of being married/unmarried, it has no specific correlation with education in males, but in females the combination of married state and education is seen to be less common than in males. Unmarried females are much more likely to be educated than married females, and more unmarried females are in employment than married females whilst, curiously, the converse holds true for married males, who have greater numbers in employment than unmarried males.

Women who have received higher levels of education display higher rates of family planning use, smaller families, and healthier children than other women in the same society. Where educational levels are high, women are likely to postpone marriage until they finish high-school or college. Women who have completed some formal education tend to wait longer between pregnancies and births and to stop childbearing at a younger age than less-educated women. Consequently, they have smaller families and have fewer births after age 40. It is also to be noted that the children of mothers who received only limited education still display a noticeably lower risk of dying than children whose mothers have had no education.

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