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**Gulf Affairs: What is the mission of the Women’s Branch at the Institute of Public Administration (WIPA)? Any notable achievements over the past few years?**

**Hend Alsheikh:** The Women’s Branch shares the same vision as the Institute for Public Administration (IPA). Namely, both are actively participating in administrative development and fulfilling clients’ needs by providing effective training that contributes to improved performance, research and consultation with added value, and comprehensive knowledge solutions that contribute to promoting sound administrative practices in the government and private sector.

Since the establishment of WIPA in 1982, we have focused on offering pre-service course diplomas. More than 5,000 skilled females have graduated from our programs, and each student typically receives three to seven employment offers upon graduation. In addition, we trained more than 100,000 female civil servants through workshops and both short- and long-term training programs. Our faculty provides large numbers of government agencies with free-of-charge consultations in the IT, human resources, office management, and other administrative fields. We have a very mobile team that serves females across the kingdom. We

believe that gender integration is an important mission of WIPA, and it is pursued through training, consultations, and knowledge dissemination activities.

**Gulf Affairs: One of the goals of Saudi Vision 2030 is to increase women's participation in the workforce from 22 to 30 percent. How is WIPA contributing to this goal?**

**Alsheikh:** First off, IPA has launched a number of initiatives that will be a major benefit to all civil servants—including women. These include the National Program for Administrative Leadership Training and Development, which seeks to empower leaders to achieve the kingdom's Vision 2030 goals; the National Program for Distance Training, which aims to improve the efficiency of civil servants through e-learning courses; and the National Training Framework, which will raise the productivity of government human capital through premium quality training.

That being said, WIPA is responsible for a Ministry of Civil Service initiative aimed specifically at empowering women and strengthening their presence in leadership roles. There are three projects under this initiative that are worth mentioning.

The first is the Gender Balance in the Civil Service initiative, which aims to establish the regulatory and legislative framework to ensure gender parity is achieved in all sectors and at all levels of government. As it currently stands, women are overrepresented in the health and education ministries, but almost totally absent from the justice, energy, industry, and other departments. The Ministry of Civil Service is developing strategies, plans, and policies to address this issue. The second initiative relates to empowering female leaders and specifically increasing their representation in decision-making roles. The third is the Strategy for Telework in the Civil Service, which aims to empower women living in remote areas who might otherwise find it difficult to come to work.

**Gulf Affairs: What are the main obstacles hindering Saudi women from participating in the labor force?**

**Alsheikh:** Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia has achieved gender parity in education, there is still a huge discrepancy between women's educational attainment and their economic participation. This is mainly due to institutional and social barriers. Saudi women face challenges posed by government policies and practices—their professional mobility is limited horizontally, being given different tasks than men at the same authority level, as well as vertically, with men clustered in higher level roles.

Though some women have reached the leadership level, the majority of those have limited decision-making authority. We realized at WIPA that training can only go so far if women are not offered the right opportunities in the first place. We are therefore engaged in a number of initiatives to expand women's opportunities from the bottom up. We believe that gender integration is not just a Saudi problem, but a global challenge, and we are adopting best practices within the local context.

**Gulf Affairs: Is the private sector more receptive to employing Saudi women?**

**Alsheikh:** The government sector is in fact the main employer of Saudi women. Forty-one percent of government employees are women, compared to just seven-and-a-half percent of total private sector employ-

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ees. The number of Saudi females in the private sector, at five-and-a-half percent, is even lower as many of the kingdom's working women are non-nationals.

The reason Saudi women have such a low workforce participation rate in the private sector are manifold. The kingdom currently relies on a nearly unlimited supply of low-cost foreign labor, and most of these jobs are in traditionally male sectors such as construction. Bylaws also prevent women from fully participating in the private sector.

That being said, there have recently been labor market and legal reforms that have seen more women reach senior private sector positions across Saudi Arabia. Initiatives such as IPA's diploma offerings are also playing a role in helping women achieve leadership roles by ensuring they receive first-class training.

### **Gulf Affairs: What training efforts has WIPA tried to allow more women to enter the Saudi workforce?**

**Alsheikh:** Training is one of the most important vehicles to enact change and create optimal outcomes. That's why we are working on introducing gender training at different levels—targeting human resource practices and policy formation at the individual, institutional, and community levels. We believe this will help create a positive mindset toward employing women in a general sense but also for leadership roles.

### **Gulf Affairs: A Royal Decree was issued on September 26, 2017 granting women the right to obtain driver's licenses. What impact will this have on female participation in the Saudi labor force?**

**Alsheikh:** Transportation was one of the main obstacles to women's mobility, and so allowing women to drive enables them to reach their workplace on their own terms—it will facilitate mobility and decrease the cost of transportation. Therefore, it is a necessary step and will have a very positive impact in the long run on women. It will also create employment opportunities in many activities related to driving such as working for the police department, traffic control, transportation services, and even driving instructors.