



RESEARCH ARTICLE

EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF SAUDI WOMEN IN LIGHT OF VISION 2030

***Dr. Muneera Qassim Al-Mssallem**

Department of Nutritional and Food Sciences, Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, King Faisal University, AlHassa 31982, PO Box 420, Saudi Arabia

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 27th January, 2018

Received in revised form

18th February, 2018

Accepted 29th March, 2018

Published online 30th April, 2018

Key words:

Education, Empowerment,
Female students, Saudi,
Vision 2030, Women.

ABSTRACT

Women in Islamic society have an important position and all their rights should be guaranteed, including the right of education according to the Islamic law. The education of Saudi women has received a great deal of attention since the time of King Abdul Aziz. This paper addresses the role of Agricultural and Food Sciences College at King Faisal University in educating and empowering Saudi women. A descriptive and quantitative analysis was carried out based on secondary data obtained from the annual King Faisal University statistics and Saudi Ministry of Education statistics. The results showed that the number of female students was about 14% for the academic year 1978-1979, and it has grown to 68% for the academic year 2016-2017. The role of the college also opened the door for female students to complete their master degree in 2005-2006. The College has also been keen to employ and recruit highly qualified staff, giving some opportunities for leadership positions. The college staff were confident of carrying the message they received from their college, achieving the vision of the college towards excellence in education, scientific research and community service. This definitely fulfills Saudi's Vision 2030 through equal opportunities in education and empowerment. This study recommends that it is necessary to ensure the participation of female Saudi staff in promising researches and facilitate their access to the University laboratories and research centers.

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Citation: Dr. Muneera Qassim Al-Mssallem, 2018. "Education and empowerment of Saudi women in light of vision 2030", *International Journal of Current Research*, 10, (04), 68409-68413.

INTRODUCTION

It is evidence that Islam puts an emphasis on the importance of knowledge, which is considered the only way to understanding the real life. In fact, Islam encourages both males and females to learn and search the knowledge, practice and gain experience. Therefore, the first revelation of our Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) was the word "Read"¹. This is a sign of the importance of asking for knowledge, urging it and presenting it to any matter of life. It is the basis for civilizations and the adoption of cultures. Knowledge is not limited to a specific age or sex; it is the right of the young and the old, male and female. When we talk about the right of women to be educated, we see that Islam law gave her this right as well as that of a man equally. Women at our Prophet era (peace be upon him) were keen to seek knowledge, and the Prophet has acknowledged their right of education. On this basis, it is not surprising that the rulers of Saudi Arabia pay great attention to the education of women, following the God edict and His Prophet approach (peace be upon him),

believing that the development of male and female human resources is the main element in the march of society progress and development. The education of Saudi women has received a great deal of care and attention since the time of the first founder, King Abdul Aziz and his sons followed this interest, care and attention to women's education and empowerment as one of the pillars of community development and progress. Saudi women have demonstrated their superiority and distinction in both scientific and practical terms despite the social challenges that constrain them and restrict their release (Elmulthum and Elsayed, 2017). She has established her distinctive mark in many areas and has become a catalyst for participation in the renaissance and construction in accordance with the nature and what is required by the religion of the commitment to the veil and customs of the Islamic and Arabic heritage.

¹ Surat Al-Alaq, chapter 96, verse 1.

The education of women in Saudi Arabia passed through three stages. Initially, it was known as the women's patties (elementary school), which has been widespread since ancient times in Makkah and Madinah.

*Corresponding author: Dr. Muneera Qassim Al-Mssallem, Department of nutritional and food sciences, Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, King Faisal University, AlHassa 31982, PO Box 420, Saudi Arabia.

It was important as an educational institution that taught women about their religion and life skills. King Abdul Aziz had an impact on the development of Saudi women's education. He supported the establishment of 180 female patties, in addition to the existing ones from the first Saudi state (Alyami, 2014 and Al Rawaf and Simmons, 1991). The second stage of Saudi women's education was a semi-formal education through private and charity schools. It was spread in Hijaz, and this stage continued for a brief period until the Formal Women Education started when the General Presidency for Girls Education was established in 1959 (Alyami, 2014 and Al Rawaf and Simmons, 1991). This was followed by a comprehensive educational renaissance that allowed women to move confidently towards achieving their aspirations and demonstrating their distinctiveness in various fields, making them prominent in all fields at local and international levels (Al Lily, 2011 and Hamdan, 2005). We are now living in this renaissance and we find models of educated Saudi women and specialized researchers, confirming their success. Saudi women have given themselves an advanced seat in the largest local and international universities and have thus attracted the attention of international observers with their outstanding scientific and research achievements (Alhareth *et al.*, 2015).

In Saudi Arabia, the first university was the College of Sharia in Makkah which was established in 1949. It is now the basis of Umm Al Qura University. There are now about 41 public and private universities, and similar numbers are public and private specialist colleges (Higher Education Statistics Center, 2017). King Faisal University (KFU), established in 1975, is one of the first seven universities established in the country. The College of Agricultural and Food Sciences (CAFS) was among the four colleges that the university commenced with. The main goal of the CAFS is to achieve the university's vision of excellency in teaching, researching and servicing the community. The objectives of the College are to create a wealth of manpower specialized in agriculture and related fields, in order to contribute to the growth of the agricultural sector and increase the capacity of food production in the Kingdom and neighboring countries. It also aims to find appropriate solutions for agricultural problems through conducting relevant applied scientific researches, advising farmers and contributing to improve agricultural practices for the benefit of citizens and country (Al-Saadat *et al.*, 2004 and King Faisal University, 2005). In 1978, the CAFS has involved women in higher education through establishing female's section. The College has also played a leading role in providing education to females in the neighboring regions of the Arab Gulf countries.

The Saudi government pays attention to providing secured and private venues only for women where they can receive their right in education and work in a comfortable environment, which is a unique advantage for women in Saudi Arabia that is not present in any country. At that time, this advantage was an attractive factor for some families in Arab Gulf countries to send their girls to study in Saudi Universities including King Faisal University. The Department of female students included the Home Economics Department where it was the only section in the college dedicated to female students and offered them different specialties in food and nutrition, family and child development, and home economics. The department aimed to prepare the students professionally to contribute in developing the individual better improve society. It also helped

the female student to make greater use of her abilities, resources and responsibilities; helping to provide a better life for the family and society by establishing noble values within it (Al-Saadat *et al.*, 2004 and King Faisal University, 2005). As a result of the changes in the national development plans, important alterations were made in restructuring plans of the CAFS. The Minister of Education approved four female majors of the bachelor's degree in Food Science and Technology, Horticulture, Nutrition Science, and Applied Economics. The enrollment of female students in the Biotechnology and Plant Protection departments are ongoing. The aim of this paper is to highlight the role of the CAFS in the Saudi female education and to enable them to be empowered in all future paths they wish to take.

Methodology of the study

This research was based on secondary data obtained from the statistics of the Saudi Ministry of Education (Higher Education Statistics Center, 2017). Data on the number of enrolled and graduated students of the CAFS for males and females were collected from the annual King Faisal University Statistics (Deanship of Information Technology, 2017; Deanship of Admission and Registration, 2015; Deanship of Admission and Registration, 2016; Deanship of Admission and Registration, 2017; King Faisal University, 2005 and King Faisal University, 2009). Data of the CAFS male and female staff and employees were also obtained from the same source. The descriptive and quantitative statistics were applied, and the expected number of graduated female students was estimated between 2018-2023 using the exponential function (Elmulthum and Elsayed, 2017).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows the total number of students at KFU for the academic year 2016-2017, reaching 37658 students, while the number of students of the CAFS in the same academic year was 3616 students. The number of students in the college represented 10% of the total number of students at KFU. The CAFS commenced teaching the first graduated female students in the autumn of 1978, and they were only 29 students. On the other hand, the number of male students enrolled in that year was 176 students (Al-Saadat *et al.*, 2004). The number of students enrolled in the college has continued to increase for both genders. However, after 10 years, the number of female students has begun to exceed the number of male students (Figure 2). In the beginning, the percentage of female students was 14% compared to 86% for male students. After 40 years, this percentage of female students increased to 68% versus 32% for male students. This is attributed to the fact that the CAFS still attracts female students despite the other varieties of colleges and departments that are now available to female students at KFU. In addition, the number of male students is the total students in 7 departments, while the number of the female students is the total students from only 2 departments, and this certainly indicates the importance of the female department in serving this huge number of female students.

Graduated female students

The first graduated female students in the CAFS has graduated in 1981-1982, and they were only 18 students. The number of graduated female students has increased as a result of the increase in the number of admissions. Last year (2016-2017), the number of graduated female students was 399 students.

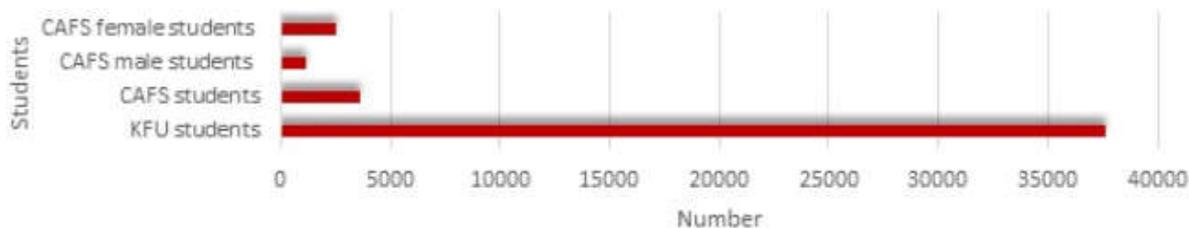


Figure 1. The KFU students versus CAFS students in 2016-2017

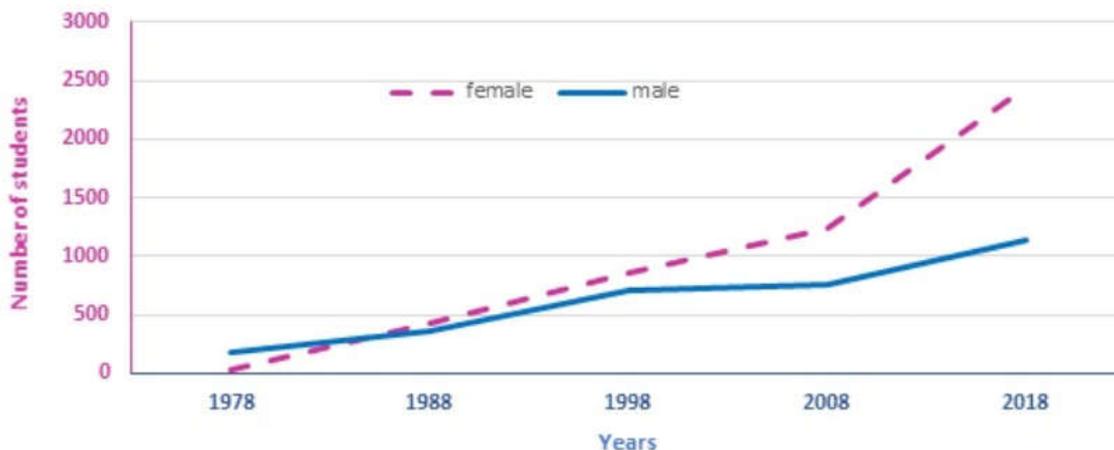


Figure 2. Development of the male and female students in the College of Agricultural and Food Sciences between 1978 and 2017

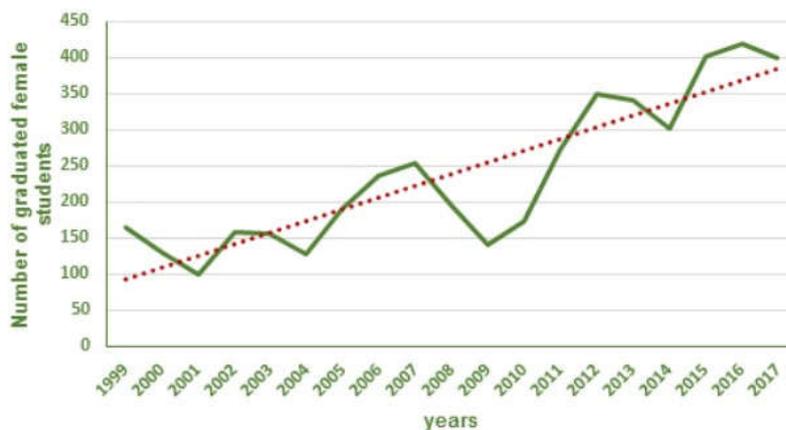


Figure 3. Graduated female students in the College of Agricultural and Food Sciences during 2000 to 2017

Figure 3 shows the number of graduated female students from 1999 to 2017. Despite the fluctuation in the number of graduated female students, the overall trend is to increase (Figure 3). Figure 4 demonstrates the predictive number of graduate female students in CAFS for the next six years (2018 to 2023). According to equation (1), the number of female graduates is expected to increase annually by around 7%. Hence, next year's female graduates for the academic year 2017-2018 is expected to reach 428.

$$\ln Y = 4.69 + 0.069 X \quad (\text{equation 1})$$

$$(t=7.2) R^2 = 0.75 \quad F = 52.11$$

Postgraduate programs for female students in the CAFS

The role of the CAFS in educating women was not limited to the bachelor's degree only, but also to the opening of admissions to the postgraduate program.

This was in the academic year 1985-1986, where the college gave a master's degree in three specialties: food and nutrition, family and child development, and home economics. The first female postgraduate students graduated in 1987-1988. The total number of female postgraduate students between 1987 and 2001 was 24 female students compared to 19 male students in the same period (Al-Saadat *et al.*, 2004). Currently there are 72 postgraduate female students in the Nutrition and Food Science department and the Agribusiness and Consumer Science Department, whether they be KFU staff or students that desire to continue their education. This is an obvious indicator of the CAFS, KFU, and the Kingdom's efforts towards giving more opportunities to Saudi women to complete their higher education.

Empowerment of Saudi Women in the CAFS: The CAFS has paid more attention to employ and empower Saudi women by providing them with qualification opportunities through offering training courses, workshops and scholarships.

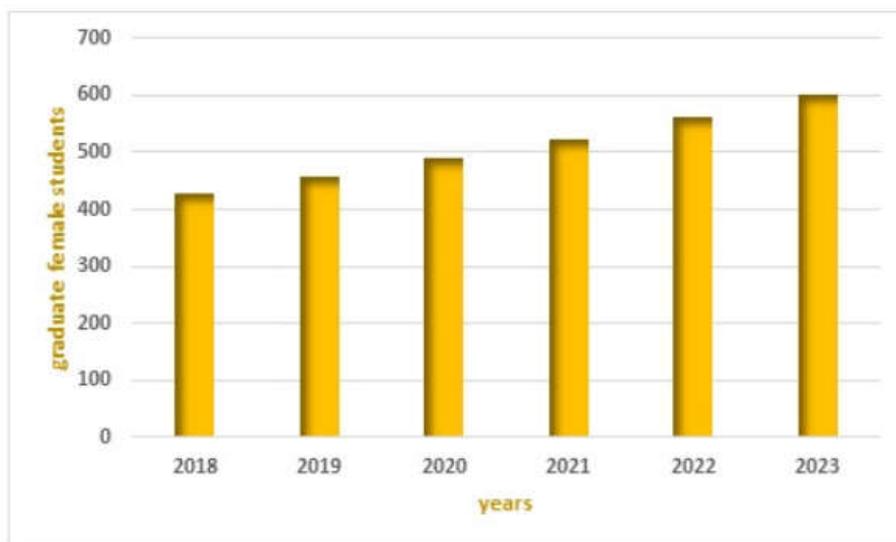


Figure 4. Prediction of the graduate female students at the CAFS for 2018 to 2023

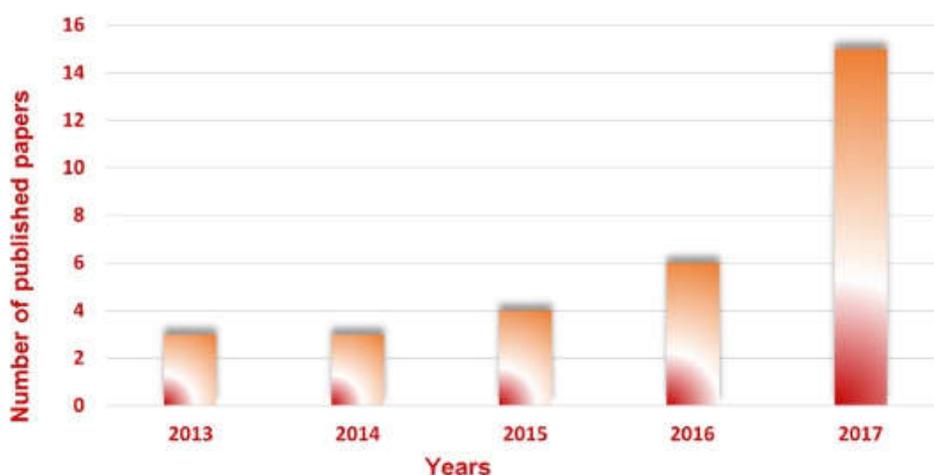


Figure 5. The scientific published papers of Saudi female academic staff during the last 5 years

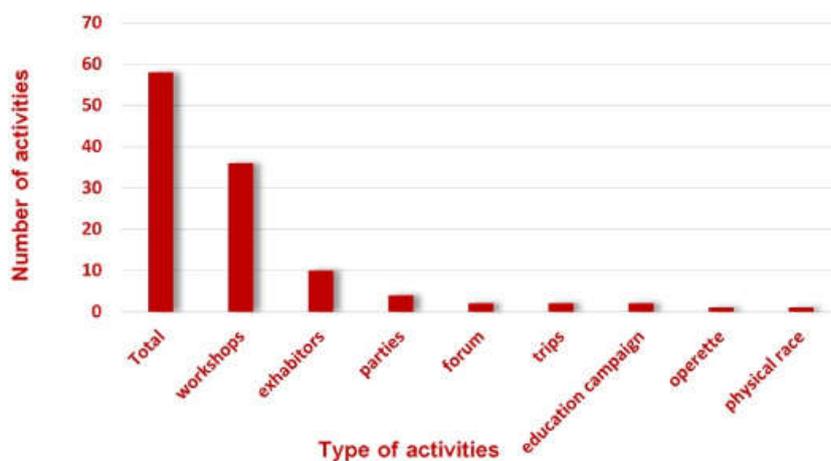


Figure 6. Female department activities at CAFS in 2016-2017

The number of Saudi staff in the female department are 14 members including assistant and associate professors, lecturers and demonstrators, compared to 66 Saudi staff in male department. The large gap between the female and male departments is due to the fact that the female staff is mostly concentrated (11 Saudi staff) in the Nutrition sciences department, while male staff is distributed among 7 different departments.

Within Nutrition Sciences, the percentage of female staff reaches 61% versus 39% of male staff. Saudi women have been given the opportunity to hold leadership positions as vice dean, departmental coordinators, and chairpersons. They have demonstrated their superiority in their roles and have excellent achievements in showing and representing the college in the fields of science and community service.

This is undoubtedly in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 on equal employment opportunities, increasing women's empowerment and strengthening their role in society. Administrators and technicians in the female department accounted for 41% compared to 59% of males in the academic year 2016-2017. This is also explained by the fact that this number of 20 female employees serves only two departments, while 29 employees in male department are to serve 7 departments.

Saudi female staff contributions in publication

The CAFS is encouraging academic staff to publish their scientific works in high impact factor journals. This effort has resulted in a number of participations in local and international journals. Saudi female academic staff have published about 31 papers during the last 5 years (Figure 5). 32% of these papers were published in high impact factor journals ranged from 1 to 6.92.

Female department activities and community engagement

The CAFS staff, students and employees participate in all type of activities and community engagement. For example, there were about 58 activities during the academic year 2016-2017 (Figure 6). The workshops were the highest, which accounted for 62% of all activities, followed by exhibitions at 18%. These activities were characterized by outstanding creativity and diversity in their themes and focus on providing benefits to the local society. The activities took place inside KFU and others outside it such as hospitals, commercial complexes, schools and some governmental and private institutions.

Conclusion

The College of Agricultural and Food Sciences is keen to achieve basic goals emanating from the objectives and mission of the university. It is to build a distinctive educational and research environment in terms of programs, curricula and study systems to graduate high qualified students able to serve their society and participate effectively in the process of building and expanding its role in the service of society. One of the priorities of the Nutritional and Food Sciences female department is to qualify cadres specialized in the fields of nutrition and food sciences, able to continue self-education and scientific research, and to meet the challenges and future developments in this area. While the Department of Agri business and Consumer Sciences focuses on providing the student with the knowledge and skills that qualify them to deal with global economic developments and fulfill research achievements in the fields of agribusiness management and consumer science in line with the mission of the college and the university. It is obvious the CAFS staff and students carried the message of their college, translated and applied it in their community as a part of their contribution in developing the society. It is fact that the CAFS vision was emerged from the KFU vision towards leadership and excellence in education, scientific research and community service in light with Saudi Vision 2030.

This study recommends that it is necessary to enable Saudi women in participating in the promising scientific researches, facilitating the use of laboratories and research centers and overcoming all obstacles that impede any progress in their participation.

Acknowledgements

Author would like to thank Prof Najat El-Multhum for her comments in analysing results, and Mrs Hanan Al-Otobi, nutrition department secretary, for her assistance in collecting data.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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