In recognition of International Women’s Day, Multilaw invited the founder of the Omar Alrasheed Law Firm in Saudi Arabia, as well as three of their female legal associates to provide their views and experiences on the rise of women in Saudi society, particularly their impact in the legal field.

Driving Positive Change
The rise of female lawyers in Saudi Arabia

Why the future is bright for women in the legal profession and how our member firm helped pave the way
Women represent 50% of society, and from a pure business standpoint it seemed illogical not to utilise them as a resource. I have five sisters, all of whom are actively employed as successful doctors, lawyers, and professionals, so the idea of hiring female lawyers made sense to me.

Can you explain what was involved?

In 2011, we obtained permission from the Ministry of Labour to hire two female law graduates to work as legal trainees. Later that year, while at the International Bar Association (IBA) conference in Dubai, we mentioned to the IBA that one of our young female legal trainees – Jamila Alshalhoub – was present. In subsequent talks with the IBA and BBC, Jamila discussed the positive shift in societal attitudes towards women becoming more involved in professional positions. From that point, the Firm moved forward to complete the licensing process with the Saudi authorities, and subsequently Jamila was one of the first Saudi females licensed as an attorney in the Kingdom.

To provide some context on the licensing process for lawyers in the Kingdom, it typically includes the following steps:

- An individual must complete his/her undergraduate degree with a focus in law;
- The individual must work with an established Saudi law firm (the firm must have been practicing for at least five years) as a legal “trainee” to obtain professional training for a period of two to three years; and
- After the training period, during which time the Saudi law firm must provide periodic reports to the Lawyers’ Department at the Ministry of Justice marking the progress of the trainee, the trainee may be granted a legal license by the Ministry of Justice, allowing him/her to provide related legal services and represent clients in Saudi courts.

When we joined Multilaw in 2013, there were only 10 licensed female lawyers in the Kingdom, along with a limited number of female “legal trainees” (law graduates who have not been officially licensed). Prior to that, females were allowed to study law but rarely hired by law firms, mostly because they could not be formally licensed and, therefore, could not represent clients in court. Despite that restriction, we routinely worked with female clients, or clients with strong female leadership, and could sense a desire for increased female participation in the legal field.
I don’t recall any doubts about the abilities of Saudi females to handle the work, but there was some initial scepticism from a societal standpoint. At that time, women had to deal with other impediments – they could not drive until 2018, nor could they leave their homes without the permission of a male guardian, etc., so the logistics of getting to work were a concern for many, as they would require drivers to/from work. **Once women were provided a reasonable opportunity to prove themselves, their acceptance in the business and legal community was rapid.** From a more client-specific standpoint, we received overwhelmingly positive feedback, not only from existing clients, but we noticed an uptick in referrals from clients working with our female lawyers.

Highly positive. Our female attorneys provide different insights/perspectives, and both we and our clients notice the difference in approach and detail to matters. Additionally, **we represent companies with strong female management,** and have noticed there is often an increased comfort level when working with our female lawyers, especially in a culture that has been historically male dominated. We currently employ three Saudi females in our legal department (including legal trainees), and actively recruit females when openings arise. The success of female attorneys – as well as females succeeding in other fields – **has provided our office with the ultimate satisfaction of seeing our daughters, sisters, mothers and wives being granted the opportunities they deserve.**

What was the initial reaction of Saudi society and your clients to the licensing of female attorneys?

What has been your law firm’s experience with the hiring of Saudi female lawyers?
One component of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 Programme is the increased participation of women in the Kingdom’s workforce, including the creation of one million jobs for women, which has led to an increase in the number of women in the legal field. Since the Kingdom’s 2016 launch of Vision 2030, there has been a concerted effort to reduce the gender gap in the workforce and increase the participation of women across all sectors of society. How do you see Vision 2030 as impacting the long-term opportunities for females in the legal market?

The promotion of females in the marketplace is essential to Vision 2030 and a crucial part of the economic engine driving Saudi’s transition to a more diverse economy. It also allows the Kingdom to capitalise on 50% of Saudi society previously underutilised. In the past decade, as the Kingdom has continued opening up to foreign investment, females have become increasingly prominent in the legal community. As mentioned previously, in 2013 there were only 10 licensed female lawyers in the Kingdom. By 2016, when Vision 2030 was launched, this number had risen to 118, by mid-2020 the number had further risen to 785, and currently we believe there to be more than 1,000 female lawyers, representing approximately 12% of all Saudi licensed lawyers in the Kingdom.

More tellingly, 976 females accounted for 16% of all legal trainees in 2016, and by 2020 the number had risen to 2,492 females, representing 59% of active legal trainees in the Kingdom. Clearly, women are taking advantage of the opportunity to make their impact in the legal field.

If we look at recent numbers relating to women in the workplace, and not just limited to the legal sector, in 2020 Saudi female labour force participation increased from 25.9% in the first quarter to 31.4% in the second quarter. Additionally, from 2016-2020 the rate of female unemployment in the Kingdom decreased by 13.9%. By extrapolating these numbers, we expect much more long-term balanced gender employment.
Driving positive change

How do you view the Omar Alrasheed Law Firm moving forward as it relates to its commitment to women in the legal community?

The Saudi legal market today is growing rapidly and developing more specialised fields. For example, the Saudi Capital Markets Authority – our financial regulatory body – is adding post-license qualifications to allow law firms to practice in the financial field. Additionally, several laws have recently been enacted, including revisions to procurement law, arbitration, bankruptcy etc.

The Kingdom’s large Giga-Projects (NEOM, Red Sea Development Authority, Al-Qiddiya, Soudah Development Company, and others) also involve separate regulatory structures. As the legal landscape in Saudi becomes more nuanced, we expect this will increase opportunities for our firm to continue to grow and to hire women.

Approximately

60%

increase in Saudi women who have entered the legal profession since 2017
Female Legal Associates

Noha Alrasheed

Noha Alrasheed attended Princess Noura University in Riyadh and received her legal license in 2020 and has been practicing since 2015. Her practice focuses primarily on transactional matters. Additionally, Noha was seconded to one of the Firm’s large government clients in 2021 and has the unique experience of viewing the progress of women from the perspectives of both a law firm and a large governmental entity.

Mashael Al Qhatani

Mashael Al Qhatani attended King Saud University in Riyadh and is a legal trainee who has been working with the Firm since 2020, focusing on both litigation and transactional matters.

Razan Al Mansour

Razan Al Mansour attended King Saud University in Riyadh and is a legal trainee who has been working with the Firm since 2021, focusing primarily on litigation matters.
What motivated you to study law?

**Noha:** I believe that having a better understanding of how the legal process works strengthens my ability to protect myself and the rights of others.

**Mashael:** The legal profession plays an integral role in any community, as it works to ensure that justice is enforced. The government’s promotion of women in the workplace encouraged me to study law.

**Razan:** I chose to study law because the legal profession is an excellent basis of knowledge, allows me to increase my analytical abilities, and empowers me to stand up for the rights of the disadvantaged.

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**29%**

Increase in Saudi women obtaining a license to practice law

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**What has been your impression of the attitude of Saudi society as it relates to women in the workplace, particularly in the legal field?**

**Noha:** Recent changes in the law towards the promotion of women in the workplace are positive. We have seen changes not only in the legal field, but in government (Saudi’s Ambassador to the USA is a woman), as well as societal changes simplifying the ability of women to interact more freely – e.g. women can now drive and travel without the approval of a guardian etc. The Saudi government has taken affirmative steps to promote women, and we are heading in the right direction, but there is still room for improvement. It seems that women must still work harder than men to prove themselves as equals.

**Mashael:** Saudi Arabia is going through an exceptional transformation period, highlighted by the empowerment of women in nearly all areas of society. The increasing visibility and acceptance of women in the workplace has naturally expanded to the legal sector. A decade ago, women in the legal field were rare, and now it would be difficult to find a respected law firm or large company in Saudi that does not have female representation.

**Razan:** The country’s ability to modernise while remaining true to its own culture and origins has been exceptional. Women are now required appointees to the Kingdom’s Shoura – or advisory – Council, and represent the Kingdom internationally. Equally impressive has been the rise of women in the legal field. I recall an article stating that the Saudi government announced in early 2018 the number of Saudi women who obtained a license to practice law increased by 29% compared to just 13% for men. Additionally, there has been an approximate 60% increase in Saudi women who have entered the legal profession since 2017.
Noha: When I first started practicing, most of my work was geared towards our non-Saudi/non-Arabic clients, who were more accustomed to working with women. Initially, our Saudi clients continued to be serviced primarily by males, likely due to a concern that arises when dealing with something unfamiliar. These concerns diminished as I gained the respect of my clients and colleagues, who realised that I was no less dedicated than my male colleagues. I now regularly work with and represent clients in the same manner as my male colleagues.

Mashael: Initially, there were some concerns from clients because, as you know, the legal profession depends in large part on the experience of its lawyers. Until recently, women were not allowed to actively represent clients and saw little path for a full-time legal career. Consequently, Saudi women did not have the typical experience preferred by clients (or law firms). However, as women continue to prove themselves to be as capable as men, the demand for female lawyers in the marketplace has risen, and the comfort level with our work product has also increased. Now, at least in my experience, it is rare for any client to object to working with a female lawyer.

Razan: While there will always be some members of society resistant to women in the legal field, as with any other profession, this is not exclusive to Saudi and occurs in other countries as well. However, in my experience our clients have been receptive to women and appreciate our willingness to prove ourselves to be as good as our male colleagues.
How do you see Vision 2030 as impacting the long-term opportunities for women in the legal market?

Noha: In the past, the concept of women pursuing a legal career was seen as unrealistic, and the initial impact of Vision 2030 appeared minimal. However, the government’s active promotion of women in the legal field will provide sustained growth. Ten years ago, there were no licensed Saudi female lawyers, and today more than 1,000 females are fully licensed, and approximately 50% of all legal trainees are women. This indicates great potential for Saudi female lawyers as the goals of Vision 2030 are promoted.

Mashael: Saudi Arabia is undergoing a transformational process in the diversification of its economy, and Vision 2030 has been a massive job creator for females in the workplace. In addition to providing employment opportunities, a by-product of Vision 2030 has been the government’s sponsoring of various courses, seminars, and other activities designed to promote the role of women in the legal market.

Razan: Vision 2030 recognises the need to promote women in the workplace, not only from a hiring standpoint, but also in providing a proper educational foundation. Accordingly, Vision 2030 looks to capitalise on the Kingdom’s educational resources. For example, Princess Noura University in Riyadh, which is the largest women’s university in the world, and its College of Law is focusing its legal curriculum on the study of both private and public law, which I believe is a direct result of the desire of the government to promote females in the legal sector.
You have been practicing law for approximately seven years, first as a legal trainee, and now as a licensed lawyer. During that time, you were also seconded to one of the Firm’s large Saudi governmental clients for a six-month period. Can you compare the two experiences, as it relates to working as a woman in a Saudi law firm, versus working as a woman in a Saudi governmental entity?

Noha: My work at the firm has been rewarding. The primary distinction is that instead of working on a single project I was given greater exposure to more diverse, large projects. Of course, this is in part due to the nature of law firms having a multitude of clients, but I have never been treated as less than equal. Regarding my secondment as legal counsel to one of the Saudi Giga-Projects, it was gratifying to see the high number of women involved in senior positions (there were four females in senior positions in the company, or who worked directly with executive management), and hiring did not appear to be gender-based, but based on experience, qualifications and ability.

“Today more than 1,000 females are fully licensed, and approximately 50% of all legal trainees are women.”

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