

Background paper* prepared for the
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2003/4
Gender and Education for All: The Leap to Equality

Case study on gender-sensitive educational policy and practice in the Sultanate of Oman

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2003

This paper was commissioned by the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* as background information to assist in drafting the 2003/4 report. It has not been edited by the team. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and should not be attributed to the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* or to UNESCO. The papers can be cited with the following reference: "Paper commissioned for the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003/4, The Leap to Equality*". For further information, please contact efareport@unesco.org

* Commissioned through the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE)

**Case study on gender-sensitive educational policy and practice
in the Sultanate of Oman
(by Shapour Rassekh)**

Some background information

The Sultanate of Oman which obtained its full independence from 20 December 1950 occupies an area of 309, 500 sq. km (119,500 sq. miles) and comprises a population of about 2,4 millions (by mid 2000). It covers the extreme East and South East parts of the Arabian Peninsula and is bordered by the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The official language is Arabic and Islam is the official religion. The majority of the population are Ibadi Muslims while about one quarter are Hindus. The main source of income is the petroleum and natural gaz, which provided together an estimated 47,8 % of GDP in 2000. In 1999, the exports of Omani crude petroleum contributed to the extent of around 75 percent to the total export earnings of the country.

The recent history of Oman can be divided into 2 parts: first, a period of conservatism and isolanism before 1970 and then, the second, a period of liberalization of the regime, and of commitment to modernization and development.

Not only a considerable development of the educational system took place after 1970, but also a policy of democratisation of school was adopted particularly in favour of girls. In 1970, there were only 3 schools in Oman with a total of 909 pupils. By 2000-1, the number of schools (public) increased to 1,125 (primary, preparatory and secondary levels) with a total of 554,845 students (to be added to 23,850 pupils in private schools)¹. At the present time, out of all pupils 48,7% are girls. At the level of higher education, the number of female students is in some years even higher than the number of males (2873 and 2759 respectively during the years 1997-8).

¹ Another source talks about 1,108 schools and 567,997 pupils by the year 2002

Reasons for gender sensitiveness of the educational policy and practice

Three reasons may explain this policy in favour of the promotion of girls' education in Oman: 1. responding to the manpower needs of the country; 2. girls' education as part of democratisation process which started over 20 years ago; 3. an enlightened leadership favourable to a balanced approach to modernization and tradition.

1. a response to the manpower needs:

One of the main problems of the Gulf region countries is precisely the shortage of qualified manpower, including school teachers. The development of girl's education has been one of the right solutions to that fundamental problem. When we look at the statistics related to the number of teachers at the different levels of education, we find out that the above-mentioned solution has proved to be quite satisfactory. The National report on the development of education in Oman (2001) indicates that the total number of female teachers at the three levels of education² exceeds that of male teachers (13,529 compared to 12,597).

2. a question of justice

Already in 1972, the Sultan Qaboos indicated that one of the important tasks ahead is the education of girls, as they constitute half of the population.³

Thanks to the Sultan decree, a consultative Assembly was created in 1981, replaced later (1991) by the Majlis-ásh-shoura (consultative council), which extended the participation of Omani citizen in national affairs. It is important to specify that from 1994, women were for the first time nominated as candidates in six regions (out of 59 districts) and around the capital; two women were subsequently appointed to the Majilis at that year.

² primary, preparatory and secondary

³ quoted in an article by Rahla-Bint-I-Amer on the "participation of the Omani women in the politics" (Kuwait, 2001)

3. readiness for modernization:

The leadership of the country, while paying due tribute to the cultural tradition, is quite aware of the necessity of opening Oman to the modernization process. In the educational policy as reflected in the 2001 National Report, we find among others the 3 following recommendations:

1. adaptation of the educational curriculum to the scientific and technological progress; 2. introduction of up-to-date educational technology 3. openness to the experience and to the advice of competent international institutions or foreign consultancy bodies.

Quantitative indicators

Various indicators from Oman education system demonstrate the firm commitment of this country to ensure the provision of educational opportunities for all citizen regardless of their gender.

1. A table reproduced in the 2001 National Report (p. 25-26) indicates that at the present time, the percentage of females to the total enrolment is 48.4 % at the primary level, 47.8 % at their preparatory level and surprisingly 50.5 % at the secondary level (see also the Annex I for the year 2002). The same report informs us that the number of female adults who completed the literacy programmes (from 1973-4 to 1999-2000) exceeds considerably that of male adults (35,404 females compared to 15,103 males).⁴
2. When we look at the level of higher education, we find that at some years, there are more females than males enrolled at that level. The World data on education (2001) informs us that at the Sultan Qaboos university, created in 1986, the total number of girl students was in 1997-

⁴ see 2001 National Report p. 23

8 a little higher than the number of boys. What seems particularly interesting is that not only in arts and education, there are more female students than males, but also in science and medicine. But as the opportunity of work in both agricultural and engineering are very limited for girls, there are very few female students in the agricultural college and no one in engineering.

3. There are also indicators that the 2 years post secondary technical industrial colleges are not very attractive for females (1437 male students compared to 568 females). But this statistics go back to the year 1995.⁵
4. Regarding the teaching staff, we said that women teachers are of greater number than male teachers. At the primary schools, female teachers are dominant (6,815 compared to 5,783). At the preparatory, the situation is inversed (4067 male compared to 3691 female teachers); but again at the secondary level woman teachers are in greater number (3023 compared to 2747).⁶ It will be interesting to carry out research on the impact of this feminization of teaching staff on student's behaviour and attitudes in the Oman situation.
5. Teachers are trained from the year 1995-6 either by the Faculty of education and Islamic studies at the Sultan Qaboos University or by 6 colleges of education in different regions of Oman, both awarding the bachelor degree in education. It is not clear from the documents available to us if the programme of training intended for future teachers is open to gender issues or not.
6. One of the interesting features of the education system in Oman, which differ from a great number of Muslim countries, is the adoption of co-education of boys and girls. The co-education is not limited to primary education (196 schools out of 409), but is also extended to preparatory schools (73 schools out of 501) and to secondary level (14 out of 198 secondary schools). It will be advisable to make an evaluation of this

⁵ We are not in possession of more recent data.

⁶ We are not in possession of the details concerning the breakdown of teachers according to their fields of teaching and the training they had received for their task.

important experience in the Oman situation. Anyhow, the co-education gives to the young generation a better understanding of gender issue.

7. Despite exceptional progression in the direction of the equality of educational opportunities, still a slight gap exists between males and females. According to UNDP, the present rate of literacy for men is around 80% while the same rate for women is near 62% (see Human development Report 2002). UNDP has also calculated the gross rate of schooling which combines the rates from primary to higher levels of education and come to the following figures: 56% for women and girls and 59% for men (see the same Report). These figures show clearly that the gap is reducing, thanks to the recent efforts of education system and to the readiness of female to study and advance in the society.
8. The gap is more visible when we look at labour statistics. The ILO statistics concerning the year 2000 (see Laborsta Display screen dated 2003) provides us with the following figures:
 - Total economically active population (no distinction is made between Omanis and expatriates): 721,000 (both sexes)
 - Active men: 598,000
 - Active women: 123,000

This difference shows that there is still lot of resistance in the Omani society to accept the large entrance of women in the labour market. Unfortunately, the shortage of labour data makes it difficult to present recent statistics related to the distribution of male and female active population between different sectors of the economy.⁷ The following table concerns the year 1990:

	<u>Agricultural sector</u>	<u>Industrial sector</u>	<u>Services</u>
No. of men	212,000	100,000	133,000
No. of women	11,000	18,000	24,000
Percentage of women			

⁷ The ILO intends to send soon a mission to Oman for helping the establishment of more up to date labour statistics.

in the labour force 4.9% 15.2 % 15.2%

It seems that women enjoy a less unequal opportunity in the government sector rather than in private sector. The ILO yearbook of labour statistics related to the year 2002 informs us that in 1997, the number of men as government employees in Oman was 56,460 while the women employees of the government were 22,730. The number of women government employees increased between 1994 and 1997. The tendency for the male civil servants was the reverse.⁸

9. Even if there is no official statistics concerning the unemployment rate in Oman, it seems that the unemployment of educated people among Omanis is a concern of the government. In the International Conference on the reform of secondary education held in Muscat (December 2002), the undersecretary of the Ministry of Social Development indicated that “almost 30,000 students graduate from secondary school every year (and the number is increasing) while only 10,000 find place in higher education institutions. For those who do not, being virtually unarmed with any work skills, remain idle in the street and/or a burden at home suffering the consequences of their inadequate preparations.” Greater diversification of the education system and opening of new technical-vocational avenue for the secondary school diploma holders seem to become indispensable. A particular attention should be given to the encouragement of girls in the direction of vocational training. The president of Oman’s Women Association in Muscat⁹ believes, based on a sample study that “92% of the girls would like to join vocational education as they realise its effects in acquiring practical skills and conceptual knowledge that would prepare them to join labour market.” She recommends highly that vocational secondary schools be opened

⁸ This is a detail of those data

	<u>Year 1994</u>	<u>Year 1997</u>
Men	63,690	56,460
Women	21,250	22,730

⁹ see Ms. Sayyida Zakiya Al-Busaidi paper in Conference papers abstracts of the International conference on the reform of secondary education (December 2002)

for girls in the following sectors: commerce, industry, applied fine arts and computer sciences. ILO labour statistics for the years 1970 and 1990 shows explicitly that in Oman the rate of expansion in both industrial and service sectors has been much higher than in the sector of agriculture.¹⁰

Broad educational aims and goals in the Sultanate

As mentioned in the World data on education, 2001, the Omani philosophy of education is based on the following principles and objectives:

1. to integrate the individual's intellectual, emotional, spiritual and moral development;
2. to nurture the capabilities of individual and groups and to develop the spirit of cooperation;
3. to modernize the Omani society by teaching the required technical skills and the proper intellectual approaches;
4. to achieve social and economic progress, to improve the living standards of Omanis;
5. to achieve national unity, solidarity and independence through respect for the society's achievements and cultural heritage; and finally
6. to revive the Arabic Islamic heritage.¹¹

Providing education to all members of the society, regardless of gender has been the top priority of the Ministry of Education from 1970. Later on, the Ministry directed its efforts towards the improvement of the quality through a good number of measures such as constructing and equipping adequate

¹⁰ See the following table: economically active population by sector in thousands

	<u>agriculture</u>		<u>industry</u>		<u>services</u>	
	<u>1970</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1990</u>
both sexes	113	222	35	118	50	157
men	109	212	32	100	46	133
women	4	11	3	18	5	24

¹¹ see also IBE publication: the management of curriculum change and adaptation in the Gulf Region 2001, p. 77 which present a much longer list of objectives

buildings for schools, abolitions of double shift arrangement, better training of teachers (who at the beginning had only secondary education or less), preparation of adequate textbooks, provision of necessary techniques and equipments for teaching sciences, introduction of modern technology such as computers in schools, extending the number of weeks allocated each year for school teaching-learning, improvement of foreign language (English) learning, and some others. As we can see, these reforms are beneficial both to male and female learners.

Going back to the list of objectives, one may argue that only few of them are particularly addressed as encouragement to the female school population such as “providing students with basic life skills and improving vocational preparedness” or “developing students’ basic skills in science and modern technology”. But this argument may not correspond necessarily to the reality.

Curriculum content, method and strategies

There is no doubt that the Sultanate of Oman is committed at least for the last 20 years to give a push to the equality of men and women in the education sector. A table on the evolution of the number of students in the literary classes¹² shows that from 1981-2, the number of females started to surpass the number of males so that in 1999-2000, there were 13 times more females than males in those classes.

That great effort is reflected as we have seen in closing down the gap between the two sexes in the primary, secondary and tertiary education levels. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2002) gives the following enrolment ratios in primary, secondary and tertiary education by gender for the year 1997:

	<u>Boys</u>	<u>Girls</u>
Primary	78%	74%

¹² See the National report on the evolution of education in the S. of Oman, dated 2001 (in Arabic), p. 69

Secondary	68%	66%
Tertiary	9%	7%

Only the gap in illiteracy rate remains quite high (year 2000)

<u>men</u>	<u>women</u>
19.6%	38.3% ¹³

When we examine the composition of curriculum at the primary level (grades 1 to 6), we find that only in one course (occupational or professional activity), a distinction is made between boys and girls (home education for females and agricultural activity for males).

The following figures summarises the number of lessons given weekly at primary school during six years: Islamic education - 33 hours; Arabic language - 49 hours; English language - 12 hours; Mathematics - 30 hours; General sciences - 16 hours; Social studies - 10 hours; Physical education - 12 hours; Art education - 6 hours; Music education - 6 hours; Occupational activities - 4 hours and Practical activities - 2 hours. Total weekly lessons 30 hours in every grade.

With the exception of practical activities, the same courses are given at the preparatory level (grades 7, 8 and 9). Only in the case of occupational activities, girls go to Home Economics and boys to Agricultural or Industrial activities as we said. Number of weekly courses at that period: Islamic education – 12 hours; Arabic language – 18 hours; English – 12 hours; Mathematics – 15 hours; General sciences – 12 hours; Social studies – 9 hours; Physical education – 3 hours; Art education – 3 hours; Music education – 3 hours and Occupational activities – 3 hours (total weekly lessons – 30 hours).

At the secondary level (3 years from grades 10 to 12), again Home Economics is for females and Agricultural or Industrial activities for males. At

¹³ See: Compendium of social statistics and indicators, fifth issue

the secondary the number of weekly lessons raises up to 35. The title of general sciences is replaced by some specific disciplines: Chemistry, Physics, Biology, History and Geography. A new title appears instead of Social studies, namely Civic education, and economics and administrative sciences are added. Physical education and art education continue but not the Music Education.¹⁴

One may guess that the content of physical education will not be the same for boys and girls at the secondary level.

In the new programme made for basic education, two new subjects have been introduced: 1. Environmental life skills; 2. Information technology and computer.¹⁵ We should indicate that the new school system composed of 10 years of basic education (composed of 2 cycles of 1st to 4th and 5th to 10th grades) and 2 years of secondary education has been introduced only recently. For the sake of the new programme, the school year has been expanded to 180 working days, with 8 classes of 40 minutes each day. (See also Annex II for the number of academic hours in the new system).

According to the Oman 2001 National Report, the new Educational Development Plan envisages a number of important qualitative improvements in the schools curricular context and methods of teaching, some of which are presented below:

1. avoiding an emphasis on rote learning;
2. giving greater weight to practical experience and experimental learning;
3. limiting the theoretical dimensions so that it does not dominate the practical component;
4. laying emphasis on competencies and linking them with the local environment;
5. introducing appropriate instructional methodology particularly in Science education;
6. familiarising students with the new information technology;

¹⁴ See National Report on the development of education; UNICEF and Oman N.C. for education, cultural and science, 2001, p. 67-68

¹⁵ See the same report p. 69. Basic education is defined as 10 year confirmed education provided by the State for all children at school age (see p. 14 – 15 of National Report, 2001).

7. linking school subjects with the student's practical world
8. encouraging student's autonomous learning

These new orientations have no gender bias. They are beneficial for both sexes. The Educational Development Plan specifies that the new approach (to basic education) is “a unified education for both boys and girls alike, as members of the same society, with the same objectives and cultures”¹⁶ (2001 National Report, p. 14)

Learning content by subject

The question has been asked about the degree of gender sensitiveness in areas such as life skills, HIV/Aids and sexuality education. The compendium of social statistics and indicators (2002) indicates that the number of cases of aids is quite limited in countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Oman. The cumulative total of cases from 1993 to 1998 has been only 67 in the Sultanate. Already in 1990, the country has been familiar with the modern means for family planning (contraceptives). With the official Islamic religion of the country and considering the situation of prevalence of diseases, the sexuality education in school has not yet been viewed as a great necessity.

We mentioned already that at the secondary education a course on Civic education is provided. But it is limited to one hour a week in the grade 1 and is oriented toward Omani society. It seems that citizenship training needs much more than what is already in the programme. With the reinforcement of

¹⁶ at the end of the same phrase there is a reference to the country's Arab and Islamic identity. We know that there exist in the Muslim world two “perceptions” of the Muslims' Holy Scripture: The Koran, one limiting the human rights of women to great extent and the other considering that gender has no importance in the sight of God, the Creator. The present Ibadi's view is very much in line with the second perception.

democracy in the country, young students need much stronger education in that direction.

Teachers and teacher training

As indicated before, the number of female teachers in both primary and secondary schools in Oman is meaningfully higher than that of male teachers, according to 1999-2000 statistics (National 2001 Report, p. 21). Only in preparatory, male teachers dominate¹⁷. The male-female difference is particularly notable at the primary level, a feature which can be found practically in most countries.¹⁸

The greater women role in the teaching profession can be considered as a new trend. Before 1996-7 male teachers were dominating in the whole system (in 1996-7 there were 11,978 male teachers against 11,659 female teachers, but in the year before, the proportion were 11,775 males to 11,314 females). The question may be asked to what extent, Beijing international conference on women (1995) was influential in that change of orientation? Another reason may be that from around that year (1996-7), the country which was using teachers from Arab sisterly countries and other friendly countries “started to accelerate the employment of “ trained Omani teachers (National 2001 Report, p. 20 – 21). The same Report adds a third reason: “after cycle 1 of Basic education schools opened in 1998-9, the number of female teachers started increasing since these schools had a female teaching staff”.

For the “Omanization of teaching staff”, the Ministry of education established, in addition to Sultan Qaboos University, a number of Teacher training colleges, as already indicated. “These colleges played a great role in

¹⁷ see the following table for the year 1999-2000

<u>Level</u>	<u>male teachers</u>	<u>female teachers</u>
Primary	5,783	6,815
Preparatory	4,067	3,691
Secondary	2,747	3,027
Subtotal	12,597	13,529

¹⁸ According to the Compendium of social statistics (2002) women/men ratio at this primary (or basic) level is /w/100m): 106. 9 in S. Arabia; 187.2 in Syria , even 230.2 in UAE and 386.6 in Qatar. The main reason is that women are considered to have a better understanding of children conditions and needs

providing qualified personnel to teach at elementary level and efforts are still underway to Omanise the teaching force at the higher levels". (National 2001 Report, p. 22). One has to remember that still in the year 2001-2, out of 26,416 teachers¹⁹ at all levels (in both government and private schools), 8,673 are non-Omanis (nearly a third). Among other school personnel (headmasters, audio-visual technicians, laboratory technicians, etc) there exist still some 544 non-Omanis (or expatriates) against 1339 Omanis (National Report of 2001, p. 22).

At the present time, as specified before, most of the serving teachers in Oman are two-year diploma holders. The target of the Ministry of Education is to elevate the level of teacher training and at the same time improve the "training of new teachers for basic education schools".²⁰ The details of new training programmes are not publicized. We know only that:

1. teaching personnel will undergo the in-service training programme "necessary to cope with innovations in method of teaching and use of education media and student centred approaches to teaching and learning" (2001 National Report, p. 39 – 40).
2. teachers will be familiarized with the new contents of education, some of which are specified in the 2001 National Report, p. 40 –41, such as children's' rights, better use of information media, development of the capacity of "living together" in harmony and peace, and some others. Among these new contents, special mention should be made of the life skills which includes skills to deal with family affairs, management skills, commercial skills, communication skills etc. Familiarity with computer science and information technology may be considered as another useful skill;
3. the official document emphasizes the importance of developing student's critical thinking and creativity, but it is not clear how the teachers will embark in those lines;
4. teachers will learn how to promote experimental learning among their pupils (through experiments, field visits and excursions, etc) to link

¹⁹ This figure is slightly higher than the total 26,126 already mentioned.

²⁰ Basic education of 10 years duration started only in the academic year 1998-9

theories with practices, and to reduce dependence on textbooks as a source of knowledge;

5. teachers will also learn to use tutorial approach to independent learning among their pupils.
6. teachers will become also familiar with the new modes of assessment and evaluation which avoid complete dependence on examinations and adapt a continuous formative assessment system.²¹
7. teachers will learn also how to “ensure cross-curricular links between the different subjects and to make sure that what the student learns can be applied to his daily life.”²²

In the documents available there is no indication about any difference between teachers education provided to males and females. The Ministry of Education reports that during the year 1999, the training department of that Ministry has organised 787 training courses (in service training) involving 30,788 teachers who teach the following subjects in Basic education (introduced from 1998-9): Islamic education; Arabic language and Social Studies; Mathematics and Natural Sciences; English language and Computers and Information technology (National Report 2001, p. 45). As it was indicated, the Ministry has promoted in recent years a two years teacher training programme for all teachers (18 to 21 credit hours in each semester) which consist of three major groups of courses: general culture programme, behavioural culture programme and specialization programme (in elementary education or on particular subject). But the ambition of the Ministry is to see most teachers obtaining a BA diploma from the University (132 credit hours).

Salary of teachers is comparable to other government employees and male and female teachers are equal in salary, employment conditions and other advantages.

Most recent statistics which is published by the Ministry of Education in the form of CD-Rom concerns the distribution of teachers in public schools by

²¹ See National 2001 report, p. 40 - 42

²² same report, p. 44

cycle, by nationality, by gender and by qualification. It shows that at the academic year 2001-2002, there were very few teachers whose qualification is less than secondary education or equivalent to secondary or even secondary education plus some short training (see Annex III). 614 teachers have teacher diploma (not higher than secondary level). 10,057 teachers possess post-secondary diploma. The number of teachers who have university degree is 1,538. Another category is those who have university degree in education whose number seems to be quite high: 15,430. We find in the table a number of teachers who have postgraduate diploma, master degree or even doctorate degree (733 teachers). The same table shows that at 2001-2002, the number of male and female expatriate teachers was 8,300 while Omani teachers was 20,085 (2.4 times more). As these data demonstrate, the great majority of teachers in Oman are quite qualified educationally for their job. The 2001-2002 statistics shows the dominance of women teachers both among Omanis and expatriates (all together 14,5420 female teachers for 12,965 male teachers).

Decision-making in education

The Ministry of Education has involved a number of institutions and individuals for assisting in the development and implementation of new curriculum including some of the University academic staff, teaching staff of the colleges of education, subject teachers in basic and general education, experts in the field, and even parents (see 2001 National Report, p. 57).

It is not clear what proportion of those people were male or females. But there is no doubt that with the appointment of a lady Under-Secretary to the Ministry and a number of other ladies to the prominent positions, women influence sensibly the course of education in that country.²³

One very informative table, which we can find in the Ministry's statistics for 2001-2 concerns the distribution of employees in the Ministry of Education

²³ in IBE's seminar in Muscat (February 2001), we met a number of ladies at high positions such as the responsibility of Arabic or English language programmes or the function of family education or the direction of technical office for studies and development. Even the Director of Science and Mathematics Department was a lady as was the director of English language curriculum department.

both at the central headquarters and at regional directorates by gender and by nationality. As a whole out of 2,326 administrators, 392 are women (16%) and 1,934 are men (83%). Among these women we find one general director, 3 advisors, 8 directors, 6 assistant directors, 30 heads of unit, 5 education supervisors, 174 inspectors, 37 “members”, 34 typists and 94 others.

It seems to us that the training of women both on the job and out of job for occupying high administrative position should be considered as a priority. The experience of some countries quite advanced in management training could be used in this respect. Scholarship could also be envisaged from or for the appropriate foreign institutions.

One of the positive features of the educational programme in Oman was that when the Ministry encountered some reservation on the part of teachers toward its current educational reforms including the change of system, of curriculum, of contents and methods of teaching, it “increased its in-service teacher training operation and initiated an awareness campaign amongst teachers and citizens to explain and demonstrate the positive aspects and qualities of education reform project.” (2001 National Report, p. 60). In addition, the Ministry started a programme of upgrading teacher’s qualifications to Bachelor’s degree level at all levels of education, a project which is now underway. This very tactful response to those who were resistant to the reform is a sign of the management maturity.

It is also worthy mentioning that not only the Ministry invested a lot in the preparation and publication of large number of course books, but thought also of the publication of teacher’s guide. The establishment of learning resource centres “equipped with modern technologies, computers, reference books and audio-visual aids ²⁴” is another initiative which can help the same purpose.

Another great decision of the Ministry has been the decentralization of the administration in order to encourage decision making at all levels. For that

²⁴ See the report on management of curriculum change and adaptation in the Gulf Region, p. 79

purpose, the Ministry has established several (11) regional directorates of education in the country²⁵. It is particularly at the level of managing the implementation of the educational reforms that the regions have secured the necessary authority from the Ministry. It is interesting to know that “parents councils” are involved in that decentralization scheme. School Board which has few teachers in its composition creates a link between administrators and teaching staff. Students from grade 4 and up are allowed to have their own councils.²⁶

School organization and management

We already indicated the existence of three councils at the level of each school: school board, parent council and students council.

According to the National 2001 Report the main task of school Board is to help achievement of the Ministry specified educational objectives. Students' council supervise social, sports, cultural, recreational and artistic activities. The Parents council's aim is to increase the participation and collaboration of the local community with school. This democratic approach to the administration should theoretically help a better adaptation of educational reforms to the reality of different regions and localities. It opens also the doors to a larger participation of women (teachers, parents, pupils, citizen) in the decision-making processes in the educational field. The dialogue between parents and teachers through parent-teacher Association²⁷ may contribute to improving the quality of education. These associations exist not only at the central and regional level but also at the level of each school.

One of the problems in implementing reforms as mentioned in the National Report of 2001 is a shortage of financial resources devoted to education (p. 34) despite the fact that Oman is spending 16.4% of its

²⁵ World data on education, 2001; National Report of 2001, p. 34

²⁶ National 2001 report, p. 6-7

²⁷ see World data on education, 2001

government budget in this sector.²⁸ One wonders why the School Boards cannot be enlarged to include the representatives of economic sector for assistance and if necessary fund raising?²⁹

To ensure the quality of education, the Ministry has reinforced the supervision function. To that end, it has developed in collaboration with the University a diploma programme for the production of both school managers (heads) and education supervisors (2002 Report, p. 17). In the year 2000-1, sixty school heads and forty supervisors were under such training programme.³⁰

Based on the evaluation of teachers performance in school, the Ministry has come to conclusion that male teachers are more able to teach Koran (the Holy Book) than females. This was the only information on gender difference we obtained from the available documents in the area of teachers' performance.

Evaluation and monitoring

The available documents talk a lot about the improvement of the educational administration. We already referred to the issue of decentralization, which is one important aspect of this reform. The continuous evaluation and monitoring of the whole system has been another aspect. Documents such as the National Report of 2001 are a proof that recently in the frame of the country's national development plan, a revision of the education and the curriculum has been made in the light of past evaluation and monitoring.

Some of the deficiencies of the previous system which the new system tries to avoid have been:

²⁸ the figure is for 1997 (see compendium, p. 47)

²⁹ maybe the answer is in the following paragraph of the National Report (p.34): "The Government has started encouraging the private sector to provide pre-school education and has also encouraged it to invest in vocational training. The response was not as much as anticipated..."

³⁰ It is worth to mention that the Ministry has prepared a guidebook for educational supervision where the objectives of curriculum are stated and concept of supervision and its methods explained.

1. the high rate of drop-outs at the primary and preparatory levels which led the Ministry to establish a new ten year school system of basic education (which for some times will run concurrently with the old system);
2. the inadequacy of the past system in relation to manpower needs of the country particularly at the level of highly trained and skilled personnel which led the Ministry to diversify the education system, expand vocational education (still insufficient), improve science education, introduce new technology (particularly computer) and create well-equipped learning centres in schools;
3. the high rate of the illiteracy particularly among girls which led the Ministry to universalise the education for boys and girls, to intensify literacy learning, to expand pre-school education with the participation of the private sector;
4. the insufficient quality of the education offered before which led to a great number of measures from the construction of appropriate school building, to the retraining and upgrading of school teachers, the development of new text books and instructional materials, and also a change in assessment and evaluation of students' performance, measures which were referred to in the past section;
5. bringing the educator closer to the citizen through a decentralization scheme was another consideration in changing the previous system, an issue which was already discussed at length.

It seems to us that gender consideration has not played a significant role in the reform of the educational system, exception made of the objective of universalization. Now the authorities are in position to realize that providing girls with equal opportunities in education will be an important solution to the problem of shortage of required high-level skilled manpower.

Conclusion

What the sultanate of Oman has achieved in one generation (from 1971 on) is really tremendous. Not only co-education has been promoted in a good portion of schools, but also girl education has been pushed far ahead in other

schools to the degree that one may say that Oman is very near the objective of gender equality in education³¹.

It is worth to be said that women being quite behind men in the labour market (in 1996, the rate of the economic activity for men was 64.2% and for women only 10.10%)³², nowadays, women realise that they have to make particular effort to reduce the gap. A paper presented by the president of Oman's Women Association to the International Conference on the reform of secondary education (2002) show clearly that over 90% of the girls like joining vocational education in order to acquire practical skills and be prepared for the labour market. Unfortunately, the investment in the area of vocational and technical education does not seem to be adequate.

The fact that the number of female teachers is higher than that of male teachers is another demonstration that women are quite willing to receive higher education to get a professional job.

In this respect, we have to remember that every year almost 30,000 pupils graduate from secondary schools and only 10,000 find place in higher education institutions.³³ Apparently, the girls have higher chance to get to the university, but a solution should be found for those who cannot enter to higher education.

Our survey of Oman education system does not show a notable difference in the curriculum designed at various levels for boys and girls. A field research is required to go deep to this particular issue. It seems to us in order to have greater number of females in the labour market in professional jobs, some additional courses could be envisaged for them helping them to acquire

³¹ the statistics of the last 2 years are according to Internet and CD as follows:
girls and boys in all levels of education excluding post-secondary

	<u>girls</u>	<u>boys</u>
Year 2000-2001	270,344	284,501
Year 2001-2002	275,299	290,698

³² see Compendium, p. 122

³³ see the paper of Dr. Thuwayba Ahmed Al-Bárwani (Bridging the gap between secondary education, tertiary education and the world of work)

some managerial skills and an entrepreneurial spirit. In Muscat secondary school conference (2002) the following was suggested: according to research, the future secondary schools graduates should be qualified in Commercial and Business areas such as sales, secretariat, purchasing, finances, accounting and business administration.³⁴

The democratisation of educational system in Oman and the place given to Parents-Teachers Associations³⁵, to student councils, etc are good promises of greater progress of democracy in that fast-advancing country.

Oman will be faced in the coming years with most challenging problem of finding substitutes for the oil revenues on which the economy is strongly based. There is no better solution to that problem than a high quality education, sufficiently diversified and responding adequately to the future manpower needs.³⁶ All human resources of the country should therefore be mobilized for that purpose, and girls and women should be encouraged to the maximum to bring their contribution to that highly vital aim.

Compendium of social statistics (p. 47) is silent about the percentage of GNP spent now in the Oman's educational sector. The up-to-date information is also missing in the world data on education (IBE 2001). It is only said that at 1995, the total educational expenditure as the percentage of GNP was 4.5%. If compared to other Arab countries, we find that Bahrain, Egypt, Syria and Iraq are spending around 4 to 4.8 % of their GNP in education. Only Saudi Arabia (7.5%), Yemen (6.3%) and Kuwait (5%) are spending more (see Compendium, p. 47). One may say that over 16% of Government expenditure and over 4% of GNP consecrated to education cannot be considered as the top limit. Omani authorities are themselves aware that they have to invest more in education. But they should also consider that it is in their interest to spend better.

³⁴ see p. 83

³⁵ see two paper on this issue in conference papers' abstracts of the International Conference on secondary education, p. 51-52

³⁶ In this respect, an excellent initiative of the Sultanate has been the preparation of "Oman Economic Vision" (2002)

Education research is one area, which needs more support. Attention should also be given to the production of needed high level human resources including women resources.

We already indicated the attachment of the educational system in Oman to the Arab and Muslim cultural tradition: education should aim at the revival of the Arabic Islamic heritage (see above). Many Arab and Muslim thinkers and scholars believe that Islam is not only favourable to women education but also to the active participation of women in the affairs of the society, In the conference of Kuwait, April 2001, on the subject of “Towards active participation of women in the 21st century”, one distinguished personality, Dr. A. Al-Ansári, Head of Islamic faculty in Qatar talking about “women rights and duties in Islam, political rights” indicated that in the rights and duties, women in Islam are equal to men, with few exceptions due to the principle of justice (see the Arabic text, non-translated, p. 245-275). Dr. Ansari provided us with a long list of women rights including the rights to be educated and to educate, the right to contribute to the betterment and to the development of the society, the right to be consulted, ownership right and the right to manage what belongs to her, reminding us that Islam respects human beings regardless of the gender aspect. “We cherish all who descend from Adam”. This is what Koran had said (see chapter 49/13 and chapter 17/70 of the Holy Book).

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Annex I

2002

Distribution of Public School Students by Gender by Cycle Across Educational Regions (2001/2002)

Region	Basic / Basic			Primary / Primary			Preparatory / Preparatory			Secondary / Secondary			Total / Total		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Muscat	6042	5883	11925	19436	18830	38266	13769	12778	26547	10286	11109	21395	49533	48600	98133
Batinah (N)	5987	6125	12112	28082	26012	54094	17415	15369	32784	12585	12732	25317	64069	60238	124307
Batinah (S)	4999	4333	9332	16094	15596	31690	10018	8997	19015	6067	7023	13090	37178	35949	73127
Dakhllyyah	5620	5305	10925	16504	15747	32251	11237	9826	21063	8432	8537	16969	41793	39415	81208
Wakhiyah	3833	3542	7375	8688	8314	17002	5720	5030	10750	3949	4171	8120	22190	21057	43247
Wakhiyah (N)	3779	3055	6834	8439	7837	16276	5420	4536	9956	3990	3860	7850	21628	19288	40916
Wakhiyah (S)	1277	1130	2407	2103	2077	4180	1843	1562	3405	1231	1352	2583	6454	6121	12575
Wakhiyah (S)	2404	2679	5083	7545	6555	14100	4995	4475	9470	4371	4216	8587	19315	17925	37240
Dhofar	3184	3364	6548	8644	8062	16706	6910	6017	12927	4890	5449	10339	23628	22892	46520
Al-Wusta	112	214	326	1623	1108	2731	594	355	949	211	89	300	2540	1766	4306
Wusandam	848	721	1569	886	894	1780	968	779	1747	668	654	1322	3370	3048	6418
Total	38085	36351	74436	118044	111032	229076	78889	69724	148613	56680	59192	115872	291698	276299	567997

Source: Statistical year book of the Sultanate of Oman Ministry of Education, year 2001-2 (CD)

Note: the table shows that for the time being the new system (basic education) exists parallel to the old one (primary and preparatory).

Annex II

The changes introduced by the new system (ten years basic education) in the number of academic hours.

<u>No.</u>	<u>Subject</u>	<u>No. of hours</u>	<u>No. of hours for 10 years general education</u>	<u>Difference</u>
1.	Islamic studies	1176	915	+261
2.	Arabic language	1992	1318	+611
3.	English language	1200	541	+659
4.	Mathematics	1776	933	+843
5.	Science	1200	635	+565
6.	Social Studies	696	448	+248
7.	Sports	384	299	+85
8.	Arts	336	187	+149
9.	Music	216	166	+48
10.	Vocational activity	--	149	-149
11.	Practical activity	--	37	-37
12.	Life skills	240	--	+240
13.	Information technology	120	--	+120
14.	Computer	264	--	+264
	Total	9600	5693	+3907

Source: paper by Dr. Hamed bin Saif Al-Hammami, Director General of curriculum and training (2002)

Annex III

Distribution of Teachers in Public Schools by Cycle by Nationality by Gender by Qualification (2001/2002)

Qualification	Basic						Primary						Preparatory						Secondary						Total			
	Om		Expat		Om		Expat		Om		Expat		Om		Expat		Om		Expat		Om		Expat					
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female				
Less Than Sec.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			
Sec. Or Equivalent	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1			
Sec. Level + Training	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0		
Teacher Diploma (Sec. Level)	1	5	17	168	8	4	161	234	0	2	7	3	0	0	0	3	1	9	11	188	406							
Postsecondary Diploma	582	2890	41	223	4087	1550	122	270	105	22	43	39	36	11	14	22	4810	4473	220	554								
University Degree	7	48	108	137	4	22	23	151	26	46	240	178	27	70	297	154	64	186	668	620								
University Degree in Education	742	1278	345	672	43	271	167	749	2146	2444	881	578	1281	2130	1041	668	4212	6123	2434	2667								
Postgraduate Diploma	15	23	10	23	1	4	1	18	30	15	22	16	21	64	64	23	67	106	97	80								
Master	0	2	27	22	0	1	8	16	0	2	70	58	7	6	77	83	7	11	182	179								
Doctorate	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	1								
Total	1347	4247	548	1245	4146	1853	482	1439	2308	2531	1265	872	1372	2281	1497	952	9173	10912	3792	4508								