

A female pioneer in the Saudi banking world

By Rabya Alfadl



As Area Manager at Al-Jazira Bank, and one of only a handful of Saudi women with almost two decades of experience in the field, Rula Al-Shugairi takes pride in the pioneering nature of her generation of female bankers and their role in educating Saudi women about banking services. Shugairi agreed to take *Academix* on a journey through the early days of banking, and reflected on women's growing opportunities today.



During the 1980s, very few employment opportunities were open to women in Saudi Arabia, with the exception of teaching. Employment was hard to find in hospitals or private companies, and the banking industry was fairly limited.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Public Administration from Jordan University in 1986, Rula returned to Saudi Arabia and joined the family business dealing in household brands. Two years later she still had not found herself. "I was not growing. I wanted to work in a career that suited my nature and interests. My father was very supportive and understood my decision to leave the company," Rula explains.

Rula's first banking position was as a teller at Saudi Cairo Bank in 1988. Retail banking was the only sector open to women at that time, unlike today when women have the chance to work in Corporate, Islamic Banking and Treasury. Even female branch managers in those days were not given equal decision-making power to their male counterparts, which is no longer the situation today.

"As women, we had to continuously prove ourselves by making the right decisions at the right time. We worked hard to establish ourselves in a field that was dominated by men in Saudi Arabia. Most of all, we had to be patient."

In addition to the gender issue, the work itself was different. "We used to write every single transaction by hand," remembers Rula. "Our generation learned banking from scratch, and we learned everything the hard way."

Rula survived two bank mergers, which usually involve employee downsizing for better efficiency. "I had to layoff some

female employees, which was very difficult on a personal level. On a positive note, I was professionally enriched with every merger because it exposed me to different corporate cultures."

Growing Responsibilities

Over the next 18 years Rula's responsibilities within retail banking grew. She was promoted from teller to head teller, to operations auditor, to branch manager and finally to Management Information Systems (MIS) Head of Western Region at SAMBA, a position previously occupied by a man for 25 years.

"Looking back, I realize now that my work experience was developing my personality. I've become a different person from the one who first entered banking. I've become more patient, able to handle the challenges of work and life in general, and I even discovered my analytical side. Banking can help improve your communication skills as you service people of many backgrounds. You'll become more organized, which will be reflected in your personal life as you run a household, manage your children and the family's finances."

Working Mothers

Like many career women, Rula's family obligations grew at the same rate as her professional responsibilities. This mother of three daughters, aged 15, 13 and six, says the secret to building a strong family and a steady career is the ability to separate both worlds. "Try not to take work home so that your family time is not sacrificed. It is difficult to learn this from the start, but with time you become more skilled at handling both parts of your life," explains Rula.

A working mother also needs to have someone she can rely on at home, be it her own mother or a housekeeper. Teaching children personal responsibility and independence at the right age is vital for them to grow up confidently, and for a mother to continue in her career. "Even if they call you at work, you need to listen to them and communicate well."

A New Generation

As Rula and many other female bankers' careers have proven, the glass ceiling no longer exists in Saudi Arabia's banking sector. "I've seen lots of changes in the last five years. The job is given to the person who most deserves it, be it a man or a woman."

Rula believes that women today are better qualified for banking positions due to better educational opportunities and the existence of new majors that are more geared towards such a career. On the other hand, she believes that the next generation does not have the patience to persevere. "New employees want to climb the ladder quickly, but they have to be patient, to learn the ropes, to put in the time and energy."

Her advice to recent graduates interested in banking is to assess which area best suits their personality, education and interests. "Try to prove yourself from day one. Show your commitment and ability to take responsibility. Give the opportunity a chance and don't rush into making decisions you'll regret in the future. At least work in a bank for a year before going on to a masters program. Banking is a lovely career and you should explore it." 