

Forty Years of Transformation

Changes in Omani Women's Physical, Cultural and Social Mobility between 1974 and 2014

Between the months of March and August 1974, social anthropologists Unni Wikan and her husband Frederik Barth lived in the Arabian Gulf country of Oman. They stayed in Sohar, a town of 15,000 on Oman's northeastern coast along the Indian Ocean. During this time, Wikan immersed herself in the daily lives of Sohari women, seeking to gain understanding into the way Sohari women perceive themselves in society. She published an anthropological account of her findings in 1982. In this paper, Wikan's writings serve as the primary source of information on the Oman of the 1970s in terms of its physical environment and the cultural and practical factors limiting women's mobility. Wikan's account is compared to observations of Omani women in society during this author's own stay in Oman between May and August 2014. In forty years of rapid modernization between 1974 and 2014, the physical arrangement of women's lives has eroded older notions of neighborly companionship. However, the rise of women's positions in the community through education and work have allowed them to establish different, yet equally meaningful, relationships with others while still abiding by cultural standards of modesty and dignity.

In 1974, the layout of individual homes and neighborhoods in Sohar exemplified local preference for privacy and gender segregation. Wikan observed that each home was surrounded by a wall of tightly woven palm fronds; a wealthy minority elected to pay for concrete walls, which were new to the region (Wikan 36). A typical home's compound contained a main house, roofed terrace, modest outdoor kitchen, and a yard made of clean, sifted sand (36). A Sohari woman's life centered on her home, as well as those of her immediate neighbors. Beyond this, the layout of Sohar remained a mystery to a woman, as the market, mosques and main roads were off-limits and her movements were generally restricted to alleyways in the neighborhood (35). Wikan notes that Sohar had little beauty to

offer but “undistinguished architecture of poor palm-frond huts. . . and small, unattractive modern cement buildings, intermixed in a styleless confusion” (27).

A number of factors served to enforce women’s seclusion in Sohar. Three exist at the intersection of cultural values of gender segregation and a wife’s duty to her husband. A woman must not pay a visit to her neighbor while her neighbor’s husband was present in the home; thus, appropriate visiting hours occurred only between 8 a.m. and 12 p.m. or 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., when a man was most assuredly away (114). Similarly, a woman must respect her husband by never leaving the house while he was present; this reinforced the strength of the same stated visiting hours (114). Third, a woman must gain the formal permission of her husband to travel beyond her immediate neighborhood. The only legitimate reason for a woman to travel was to see her parents, and even this may be forbidden by the woman’s husband (53). Two practical conditions limited a woman’s mobility: first, taxis were prohibitively expensive (114); and second, “the heat [was] so oppressive, and fear of sunstroke so strong, that walks beyond a range of ten to fifteen minutes [were] very reluctantly undertaken” (114). Because of these constraints on longer-distance travel, women often elected to visit neighbors, unchaperoned, in their immediate neighborhood.

As a result both of the physical arrangement of a woman’s local domain and cultural and practical constraints on her movement, the neighborhood represented the primary social sphere for a Sohari woman in 1974. A woman’s closest contacts were her *jiran*, her group of some two to seven neighbors living within eighty to one hundred yards of her front gate (116). These were the women whom a Sohari woman could have visited without formal escort. Neighbors intermingled almost daily and enjoyed rich, close relationships; because of the frequency of their interactions, women sought company, help and companionship from their *jiran* (39).

Between the months of June and August, 2014, this author lived and studied in the Omani city of Ibri. Ibri is almost entirely different from Sohar in terms of physical setting

and design. Contrary to Sohar, Ibri is an interior city, closer to the borders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates than to the Omani coastline. From any location in the city, one can stand on a roof, turn in a circle and see arid mountains and desert in every direction. The city's development was initially compact, centered on the fort and markets for animals and other goods. However, forty years of rapid modernization have profoundly affected the arrangement of the city. Paved asphalt roads and ubiquitous motor vehicles have rendered unimportant one's proximity to the historic city center and enabled families to build homes ever farther apart.

Most homes have electricity and air conditioning in the main public spaces. All but the oldest homes are built of cinder block; within the compound walls, homes feature similar arrangements as along the beaches of Sohar in 1974. The value of privacy appears to have held fast; indeed, with the aid of modern innovations, families have constructed compounds with entirely greater levels of seclusion. Asphalt roads have proven to be the strongest centrifugal force in development. It is now common to live a few minutes away, by car, from one's closest neighbor. Though neighbors are hardly within eyeshot, no compound is complete without a high cinder block wall on all sides and an ornately decorated gate for entrance and exit.

Changes in a woman's physical mobility in the city are mixed. At the most fundamental level, the typical Omani woman still does not appear to belong in the public sphere in modern Oman. The city of Ibri has only one mosque providing prayer space for women; it seemed an afterthought, housed in a separate building and holding space for only twenty women among a city of 100,000. The discrepancy between a woman's and a man's presence in the mosque was reinforced by a conversation with the author's host sister, Noor, who claimed she had never visited a mosque. As for the market, a woman may visit and shop in the male-dominated sphere. Nonetheless, values of modesty and shyness require young women like Noor to visit the market with a related male chaperone and for him to undertake the requisite conversation and bargaining with the shopkeeper. Lastly, no

respectful woman walks along the main thoroughfares in her city. Noor set forth a few guidelines for socially acceptable foot travel: a young woman must walk in the darkness, accompanied by a few female friends and relatives, and this only in places where she is not known by local residents.

However, the typical Omani woman's gains in mobility, especially in regard to education and work, should not be overlooked. In these respects, a woman's opportunities have greatly improved. Primary and secondary education are the government standard for both girls and boys, and it is common to pursue an associate's or technical degree at the local college. The country's best and brightest students move to Muscat, the capital, to attain a college degree from the Sultan Qaboos University. It is increasingly acceptable for a woman to work in the education or service industries, whether as a schoolteacher, a dental hygienist, or a government administrator. Through education and work, a woman's social sphere extends far beyond that of her immediate neighborhood. At school and university, she interacts with other young women from all parts of the city, and in some cases, from around the nation. At work, she meets clients and co-workers on a daily basis.

Changes in the physical arrangement of the city and women's roles in society have had mixed effects on their mobility. In the physical realm, the rapidly-expanding city has enabled families to move ever farther from one another. Thus, the close ties which Sohari women enjoyed with their *jiran* in 1974 have eroded. Countering this effect, women have since made strides in their ability to work and get an education, and they interact on a daily basis with others from all parts of their city and country. One may rightly argue that women still enjoy fulfilling ties of companionship and assistance; they simply come from different sources.

There nevertheless remains a discrepancy between women's expanding rights in education, work, and mobility, and their willingness to participate in the public sphere. This rift exists because of a deeper conflict between the newfound opportunities of the structural realm and the slower-moving expectations and restrictions of the cultural realm. Without

a doubt, Omani culture has undergone a genuine shift toward allowing newfound freedom to its young women, as evidenced by the prevalence of women in education and some fields of work. Yet as is true in many places, technical and legal barriers against women may be erased from the books much faster than cultures may shift to accommodate these changes. In the meanwhile, the women of modern Oman must strike a delicate balance between success in school and work and upholding their own dignity, modesty, and shyness according to dominant cultural norms.

The speed of Oman's development between 1974 and 2014 has been astonishing. In this time, women have transitioned from isolation so complete that they called their neighborhoods *baladna* (literally, our country) (36) to taking an active role in their communities through education and employment. Though women do not enjoy full participation in the public sphere — their appearances in the mosque, market, and main thoroughfares remain hampered by a number of constraints — one must realize that culture, too, does change. One must appreciate the gains Oman's women have made in the past forty years, and look optimistically to the changes the next forty years will inevitably bring.

References

Wikan, Unni. *Behind the Veil in Arabia: Women in Oman*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982.