



LIGHTING THE WAY



Arzanah College's female recruits look to become the oil and gas industry's leaders of the future



Clockwise from top-left: Dr. Nadia Alhasani, director of Arzanah; student Mariam Tariq Khalil; Yasmin Hedi Guefrachi, student; Nada Al Hamar, sophomore student.

When asked about women in the energy industry, the typical reaction goes something like – “Women? In the energy industry? Well there aren’t really any. Anyway, women don’t want to become engineers.”

Well yes, there are certainly a miniscule number of women working as engineers at present, but it would be wholly wrong to infer that women do not want to become engineers. One only has to take a look at Arzanah College, The Petroleum Institute’s dedicated women’s school, to see that given the opportunity and encouragement, there is no shortage of intelligent and dedicated women who would love to become engineers. Excellent engineers.

“In many respects, the work that we are doing here at Arzanah College is not a big deal - women have been working as engineers in the energy industry for a long time now. It is those women that are our role models and they have made working life much easier for all women that follow, because they

will not be an unusual spectacle in a male dominated meeting. In fact, the ladies here may well enter a team in Adnoc that is led by a woman,” explains Dr. Nadia Alhasani, director of Arzanah.

“We are not doing anything that has not already been done before, but all of a sudden the college is in the spotlight because of the numbers of women that we are recruiting and the fact that we tailor our programmes to the oil and gas industry.”

A MAN’S WORLD?

Talk abounds throughout the energy sector on the search for a young, bright and rejuvenated labour force to bolster dwindling ranks of ageing engineers. The initial founding of The Petroleum Institute (PI) in 2001 was largely in reaction to this mission and Adnoc’s predicted need for at least 3000 engineers in the coming years.

The PI soon realised, however, that in recruiting only men, they were failing to tap into the substantial number of women in the UAE who are serious about science subjects in high school.

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Nadia Alhasani, Arzanah College, The Petroleum Institute

In reaction, Arzanah women’s college was introduced in 2006 and has been remarkably successful in attracting enthusiastic Emirati women - even measured against the college’s own cautious predictions.

Today Arzanah proudly hosts 282 female students largely from Abu Dhabi, around 40% are now engineering students, with the remaining majority being foundation students hoping to progress to one of the five engineering disciplines that the college offers. And still Alhasani hopes to double the number of students within three years.

The ambitious and talented women that comprise the

college are not meandering into the energy industry by some stroke of fate, rather they are actively choosing to set out on a path that leads them to the core of the industry and they possess the abundance of enthusiasm that the industry needs.

“Arzanah College only offers engineering courses so the ladies have to be certain that they want to become engineers before they enter the college. They also have to be comfortable about working in the oil and gas industry, particularly given our partnership with Adnoc and the years that they must commit to working for the company,” says Alhasani.



Despite frequent allegations that few women want to become engineers, Arzanah has witnessed great success in attracting women since its founding in 2006.



VIEW FROM THE TOP

The women who graduate from Arzanah can hope for much from the future and Alhasani is rightly ambitious in her hopes for all of her students.

“If you look at Arzanah’s mission statement, it is to create leaders, so we are not interested in them doing the mundane engineering work within Adnoc or any other company. We are determined that in the time they spend in Adnoc, their careers accelerate quickly and they become team leaders right away.”

Women are still largely unable to stay overnight offshore, which inevitably places some constraints on the scope of work that they can do, but the possibilities are expanding. Women are no longer confined to desk jobs and are taking-up opportunities to work offshore by day.

“I would definitely want to



Tuka Al Hanai is one of 282 women studying at the Abu Dhabi college.

respect, whether they are male or female.”

Despite the increasing number of women entering the energy industry, young women interested in moving-up the career ladder glance-up and still see far too few women in senior positions. In reaction, Alhasani’s lessons have centered on

so exceptional and it has been done so many times before with relative ease. It is the women that come and speak to us that are the role models and the genuine pioneers,” declares Alhasani.

BALANCING ACT

By all accounts, the experiences shared by such women have paid dividends and impacted upon many students – just as Alhasani intended. “It was very reassuring for all of us to have a female Emirati engineer come in and speak to us who has three children, yet still manages to maintain a successful career,” says Reem Al Shamsi, a chemical engineering student.

“As long as a woman enjoys her work and is passionate about it then she can overcome any challenges that she may face and balance her work and home life. It is all about prioritising and the women that we have spoken with seem to do this very well,” adds Nada Al Hamar, a sophomore electrical engineering student.

Despite the students’ confidence, there is still somewhat

CULTURAL CONUNDRUMS

Whilst contemplating Middle Eastern women working as engineers in the oil and gas industry, the question at once arises – what are they to wear if they are working in the field? Yes, it seems rather a trivial question, but one worth addressing, if only for curiosity’s sake. After all, seeing women wearing the hijab is an everyday occurrence in the Middle East, such attire would be rather impractical when, amongst other things, trying to climb the stairs of an oil rig, not to mention contravening a raft of health and safety regulations. Nadia Alhasani explains:

“I was worried about what the girls were going to do in terms of uniforms and who would make them. In the end, there was no problem at all since it was already done for us. An Emirati female engineer visited us here at the college showed us her uniform that can be worn instead of overalls.”

“The uniform is a two piece and includes a jacket that is longer than a regular lab coat, but short enough to still allow them to climb-up and be active. The women still wear their head cover, but with their hardhat over the top and steel-toed boots are worn so as to abide by safety standards. We actually managed to get hold of a number of different outfits and the students tried them on and selected the best. We basically modified the regular uniforms that engineers wear, for example, we have to have boots, but we are women so we did not want them to be as heavy as the men’s and we ensured that the sleeves of the shirt would not ride-up above the wrists.”

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Mariam Tariq Khalil, chemical engineering student

travel and work in the field when I am working in Adnoc,” says Yasmine Hedi Guefrachi, a chemical engineering student. “It is very important to go and work in the field and get first-hand experience. If I am going to be a team leader then I have to understand the work that my team is doing so that I can guide them and gain their

‘show and tell’ sessions, sharing the experiences of female engineers currently working in the industry.

“We try as much as we can to bring in women from the oil and gas sector to give students an idea of what it will be like to work there. Through doing this, I think they now realise that what they are doing is not



Reem Al Shamsi, Arzanah student.



Maha Faisal Younis, Arzanah student.

of a mixed reaction when asked if they have any concerns about entering the energy industry. The sector is, after all, unquestionably male dominated, with the demographic scales unlikely to balance-out anytime soon.

“A great deal must still be done to change the image and misconceptions of the energy industry and show that it is a welcoming environment for women – we can help to do this. At least within Adnoc, getting the job that you want depends only on your ability and how well you perform. Every company wants the best possible person to do the job, or it will

suffer. Why should this not be a woman?” says Mariam Tariq Khalil, a chemical engineering student.

“I think a lot of the problem is the need to change the mentality of many of the oil companies themselves. They are the ones that are putting the misconceptions out there that there are no women who want to enter the industry, but that is not true. They just have to show that there are opportunities available,” says Guefrachi.

OPENING DOORS

Having met many of the women who are students at Arzanah,

it becomes apparent that Alhasani is quite right – there is nothing unusual about these women, they simply want to pursue their passion for engineering. One only has to look at the large numbers of women, from Abu Dhabi alone, applying to Arzanah to see that there is no lack of women keen to enter the industry – they simply need to be given a clear opportunity.

“Whenever people come and visit Adnoc from the US and other areas around the world, they always want to come and visit Arzanah, imagining that they will see something com-

pletely different. Upon meeting all of the girls, however, they see that there is nothing different about them at all. Arzanah is simply an engineering college that happens to be entirely comprised of women in an Arab Muslim country. I will be the first one to say if we are doing anything outside of the cultural norms of a typical Muslim Arab country,” says Alhasani.

“In Islam women always have equal opportunities as long as they are within the norms of religion, tradition and culture. In my mind, the UAE and Adnoc are amongst the most advanced nations and companies in being forward looking and encourag-

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