

For more than a decade girls have topped the merit list in the country's secondary schools and this domination has now spread to the degree courses offered by Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat. The girls are consistently coming out on top and, with a declared government policy guaranteeing Omani women equal rights in both education and employment, as enshrined in the Personal Status Laws (PSL), the sky is the limit for these ambitious young women who are grasping the available opportunities with both hands.

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos has repeatedly called upon female citizens to lend their full support to the continuing development of their country, frequently describing them as representing "half of Oman's potential". They have responded by seeking and securing jobs from government minister to supermarket check-out assistant, all of them striving to play a part in shaping the Sultanate of the 21st century. Oman is rightly proud to have been the first Arab country to appoint a woman as its overseas ambassador and currently three women hold positions on the Cabinet of Ministers (with a 4th holding an equivalent role as the President of the Public Authority for Crafts Industries); another two are undersecretaries in the government.

Women are playing an increasingly role with their presence in the *Majlis A'Shura* and the *Majlis A'Dawla*, while five female lawyers were recently appointed as attorneys general to the legislative.

There are no official figures available but it is likely that Oman has the highest number of working women among the six AGCC states, which also include Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

In 2003 an Omani woman was appointed head of the United Nations Information Centre, based in Geneva, Switzerland, with authority over an international network of 77 information centres and more than 300 staff.

The same year Muscat hosted a three day training course for women journalists in which 26 women participated from Oman, Kuwait, Yemen, Bahrain and UAE. In December 2003, the first AGCC Businesswomen's Forum, was organised by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) in co-operation with the AGCC secretariat general union of chambers. In October 2004 a woman was appointed as Minister of Social Development.

### **Omani Women's Associations (OWAs)**

The Omani Women's Association (OWA) provides a channel for voluntary work and child welfare services which are to be found throughout Oman. The government strongly encourages Omani women to become involved in voluntary social work and to contribute to the development of their communities. OWAs have been opened across the regions. At present there are 39 such associations with 2,738 members at the end of 2003.

Women's Training Centres - some established by the government and some through local initiatives - have been set up to improve the productivity of Omani families while helping to preserve the country's heritage by teaching traditional crafts and skills. The Centres also provide facilities such as kindergartens, information programmes and field visits, as well as opportunities to take part in conferences abroad.

### **Children's affairs**

Children form the basic building blocks of any society and represent its future. The Omani government attaches great importance to its child welfare programmes and has a department dedicated to children's affairs.

The government encourages the private sector to become involved in the setting up of nursery schools to provide mothers with child care facilities and a good educational environment for their children while they are at work. At present there are 33 nursery schools under government supervision operating in the country.

A foster family scheme for orphans or others who require protection has been successful. At the end of 2003 a total of 323 boys and girls were living with foster families. Residential care is provided by the Children's Care Home, established in 1995.

### **Sports and Youth Activities**

The government aims to give young people a fully rounded education by providing activities and experience in the sporting, cultural, intellectual, social and scientific spheres, and to excel internationally in these areas and for this reason in October 2004 created a Ministry of Sports Affairs to replace the General Organisation for Youth, Sports and Cultural Affairs. A wide range of

youth activities, including camps, educational trips, competitions, literary forums, drama, art workshops and science training courses are held throughout the country to ensure maximum access by the young.

In 2003 five new sports club were opened in various parts of Oman and work has started on the construction of a stadium in Seeb, scheduled for completion at the end of 2004 which will offer a wide range of facilities including multi-purpose indoor areas.

In 2003 young Omanis scored impressive achievements in the youth and sports fields, with the Sultanate's teams winning a total of 264 medals. The Olympic team reached the final Asian qualifying rounds in preparation for the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, while the first national team qualified for the finals of soccer's Asian Nations Cup, held in the People's Republic of China in the summer of 2004. In addition, the national under-16s team qualified for the finals of the Asian Under-16s Cup in Japan in 2004.

Al Khaboura Club (in the Batinah region) won the eighteenth Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (AGCC) Clubs' Under-18s Championship Cup competition in the United Arab Emirates. At other international events members of the Sultanate's swimming teams won a total of 43 medals; in addition 13 medals were awarded to members of the tennis teams, 22 were won by the athletics squad and 49 went to members of the weight-lifting team. Meanwhile, the volleyball team took two medals and the handball team was awarded a further three. Nizwa Club – representing all the Sultanate's clubs – took third place in the AGCC clubs' cultural competition in Qatar.

### **Olympics**

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded the former GOYSCA its prestigious prize for sporting excellence in recognition of its contributions to youth and sports and its efforts to promote the Olympic spirit and goals.

The Oman Olympic Committee played a major part in organizing the highly successful 2003 Olympic Days, which were of great benefit to the sports associations, clubs and young participants. The Football Association took part, along with the Handball, Basketball, Hockey, Volleyball, Athletics, Swimming, and Tennis Associations. Competitions were also held for less well-known sports such as bowling, weight-lifting, fencing, table-tennis, cycling and water sports (sailing and Olympic rowing). Over 3,198 participants attended.



*Oman's sportsmen took part in the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004.*

#### **Youth Activities**

In 2003 some 6,447 boys and girls took part in youth activities, which, as well as sport, included youth camps, literary competitions and forums, plays, art workshops and science training courses. A range of social activities were also organised during the summer months when it offers youngsters an opportunity to make constructive use of their school holidays by attending camps and summer centres and going on trips to places of interest. Over 1000 young people from across the country attended youth work camps during 2003. A variety of cultural excursions, offered the students an opportunity to learn about their country's history and heritage.

#### **Specialist Clubs**

The Science Club won the "choose your own subject" competition at the AGCC inventions and research exhibition in 2003, and it held training courses in computers, digital and TV photography, montage and aviation. The youth theatre, youth music and art sections also held courses. These took place mainly during the summer period, though other courses were also held throughout the year, when some 1,179 boys and girls attended.

### Scouts and Guides

The first Omani Scout pack was started in Muscat in 1932 and the first Guide pack was set up in 1972. This was followed by the launch of Oman's National Organisation of Scouts and Guides (NOSG) in 1975 with the aim of promoting international friendship, while helping develop individual leadership qualities and encouraging an awareness of environmental and community issues that impact upon all of society. His Majesty the Sultan was installed as Chief Scout in 1983.

Work began on a long-term strategy for the Omani Scout and Guide movement in 1990, and NOSG's second strategic plan was launched in 2002 and is due to continue until 2010.

Within the Sultanate the NOSG has gone from strength to strength; in the region of 20,000 young people are involved in the movement, including Cub Scouts and Brownies as young as seven years of age. A competition to select the Sultanate's top scout and guide attracted the participation of 9,125 young people of various age groups who took part in 82 events to reach the final selection process.

At the Arab Guides' Conference held in Muscat in June 2004, delegations from 14 Arab states attended, as well as the President and members of the World Guides' Council and the World Guides' Association.

Visits to the United Arab Emirates and Cairo allowed Omani Scouts to explore issues involving environmental conservation, developing leadership qualities and other important life skills.

Meanwhile, the Scout Band, which numbers musicians from around the Sultanate, took part in a number of regional events, including the opening ceremony of the Muscat Festival and the opening and closing ceremonies of the 23rd AGCC club championships held in Oman in March 2004.

([www.omanscouts.gov.om](http://www.omanscouts.gov.om))

*The Science Club encourages all those with special interests.*

*Being a member of the Scout Band is a full-time, paid occupation.*

