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GENERATION FAITHFUL

Some Arab Women Find Freedom in the Skies

By KATHERINE ZOEPF

ABU DHABI, [United Arab Emirates](#) — Marwa Abdel Aziz Fathi giggled self-consciously as she looked down at the new wing-shaped brooch on the left breast pocket of her crisp gray uniform, then around the room at the dozens of other Etihad flight attendants all chatting and eating canapés around her.

It was graduation day at Etihad Training Academy, where the national airline of the United Arab Emirates holds a seven-week training course for new flight attendants. Downstairs are the cavernous classrooms where Ms. Fathi and other trainees rehearsed meal service plans in life-size mockups of planes and trained in the swimming pool, where they learned how to evacuate passengers in the event of an emergency landing over water.

Despite her obvious pride, Ms. Fathi, a 22-year-old from Egypt, was amazed to find herself here.

“I never in my life thought I’d work abroad,” said Ms. Fathi, who was a university student in Cairo when she began noticing newspaper advertisements recruiting young Egyptians to work at airlines based in the Persian Gulf. “My family thought I was crazy. But then some families don’t let you leave at all.”

A decade ago, unmarried Arab women like Ms. Fathi, working outside their home countries, were rare. But just as young men from poor Arab nations flocked to the oil-rich Persian Gulf states for jobs, more young women are doing so, sociologists say, though no official statistics are kept on how many.

Flight attendants have become the public face of the new mobility for some young Arab women, just as they were the face of new freedoms for women in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. They have become a subject of social anxiety and fascination in much the same way.

The dormitory here where the Etihad flight attendants live after training looks much like the city’s many 1970s-style office blocks, its windows iridescent like gasoline on a puddle. But there are three security guards on the ground floor, a logbook for sign-ins and strict rules. Anyone who tries to sneak a man back to one of the simply furnished two-bedroom suites that the women share may be dismissed, even deported.

In the midst of an Islamic revival across the Arab world that is largely being led by young people, gulf states like Abu Dhabi — which offer freedoms and opportunities nearly unimaginable elsewhere in the Middle East — have become an unlikely place of refuge for some young Arab women. And many say that the experience of living independently and working hard for high

salaries has forever changed their ambitions and their beliefs about themselves, though it can also lead to a painful sense of alienation from their home countries and their families.

At almost any hour of the day or night, there are a dozen or more young women with identical rolling suitcases waiting in the lobby of their dormitory to be picked up for work on Etihad flights. Though several are still drowsily applying makeup — and the more steady-handed have perfected a back-of-the-bus toilette that takes exactly the length of their usual ride to Abu Dhabi International Airport — they are uniformly well ironed and blow-dried. Those with longer hair wear black hair-ties wrapped around meticulously hair-netted ponytails. They wear jaunty little caps with attached gauzy scarves that hint at hijab, the head coverings worn by many Muslim women. Like college students during exams, all of them gripe good-naturedly about how little they have slept.

There are exclamations of congratulation and commiseration as the women learn friends' assignments. Most coveted are long-haul routes to places like Toronto and Sydney, Australia, where lay overs may last many days, hotels are comfortable and per diem allowances from the airline to cover food and incidentals are generous. Short-haul flights to places like Khartoum, Sudan, are dreaded: more than four hours of work, followed by refueling, a new load of passengers, an exhausting late-night return flight to Abu Dhabi and the shuttle bus back to the dormitory tower with its vigilant guards.

Upstairs, scrubbed of their thick, professional makeup, most of the women look a decade younger. They seem to subsist on snack food: toast made, Arabic-style, by waving flaps of pita over an open flame; slivers of cheap, oversalted Bulgarian cheese; the Lebanese date-filled cookies called ajweh; pillowy rolls from a local Cinnabon outlet that one young Syrian flight attendant proclaimed herself addicted to (an expression she used with self-conscious delight, a badge of newfound worldliness).

They watch bootlegged DVDs — “Desperate Housewives,” “Sex and the City” — bought on lay overs in Bangladesh and Indonesia. They drift along the tiled floors between their rooms in velour sweatpants and fuzzy slippers, and they keep their voices low: someone is always trying to catch a wink of sleep before her flight.

A Lonely Existence

It is a hushed, lonely and fluorescent-lighted existence, and it is leavened mostly by nights out dancing. Despite the increasing numbers of women moving to the gulf countries, the labor migration patterns of the last 20 years have left the Emirates with a male-female ratio that is more skewed than anywhere else in the world; in the 15-to-64 age group, there are more than 2.7 men for every woman.

Etihad flight attendants are such popular additions to Abu Dhabi's modest hotel bar scene that their presence is encouraged by frequent “Ladies' Nights” and cabin-crew-only drink discounts. It is almost impossible for an unveiled woman in her 20s to go to a mall or grocery store in Abu Dhabi without being asked regularly, by grinning strangers, if she is a stewardess.

One evening last fall, an Egyptian flight attendant for Etihad with dyed blond hair and five-inch platform heels led a friend — a 23-year-old Tunisian woman wearing a sparkly white belt who said that she had come to the Emirates hoping to find work as a seamstress — up to the entrance of the Sax nightclub at the Royal Meridien Hotel.

Just inside, in the bar area, several young Emirates men in white dishdashas were dancing jerkily to deafening club music.

Clutching her friend by the elbow, the Egyptian woman indicated one of the bouncers. “Isn’t he just so yummy?” she shrieked. The bouncer, who had plainly heard, ignored her, and the women filed past. Despite appearances, explained the Egyptian flight attendant — who asked not to be named because she was not authorized by Etihad to speak to the news media — sex and dating are very fraught matters for most of the young Arab women who come to work in the Emirates.

Some young women cope with their new lives away from home by becoming almost nunlike, keeping to themselves and remaining very observant Muslims, she said, while others quickly find themselves in the arms of unsuitable men. “With the Arabic girls who come to work here, you get two types,” the Egyptian woman said. “They’re either very closed up and scared and they don’t do anything, or else they’re not really thinking about flying — they’re just here to get their freedom. They’re really naughty and crazy.”

Treated Like a Heroine

Rania Abou Youssef, 26, a flight attendant for the Dubai-based airline, Emirates, said that when she went home to Alexandria, Egypt, her female cousins treated her like a heroine. “I’ve been doing this for four years,” she said, “and still they’re always asking, ‘Where did you go and what was it like and where are the photographs?’ ”

Many of the young Arab women working in the Persian Gulf take delight in their status as pioneers, role models for their friends and younger female relatives. Young women brought up in a culture that highly values community, they have learned to see themselves as individuals.

For many families, allowing a daughter to work, much less to travel overseas unaccompanied, may call her virtue into question and threaten her marriage prospects. Yet this culture is changing, said Musa Shteivi, a sociologist at Jordan University in Amman. “We’re noticing more and more single women going to the gulf these days,” he said. “It’s still not exactly common, but over the last four or five years it’s become quite an observable phenomenon.”

Unemployment levels across the Arab world remain high. As the networks of Arab expatriates in the gulf countries become stronger and as cellphones and expanding Internet access make overseas communication more affordable, some families have grown more comfortable with the idea of allowing daughters to work here. Some gulf-based employers now say they tailor recruitment procedures for young women with Arab family values in mind. They may hire groups of women from a particular town or region, for example, so the women can support one another once in the gulf. “A lot of girls do this now because this has a reputation for being very safe,” said Enas Hassan, an Iraqi flight attendant for Emirates. “The families have a sense of security. They know that if

their girls start flying they won't be thrown into the wide world without protection.”

A Feeling of Displacement

Yet not every one can make peace with life in the United Arab Emirates, the young flight attendants say. Even the landscape — block after sterile block of hotels and office buildings with small shops and takeout restaurants on their lower floors — can contribute to a feeling of displacement. Nearly all year long, for most of the day, the sunlight is bright white, so harsh that it obliterates all contrast. Despite vigilant watering, even the palm trees on roadsides look grayish and embattled.

Some of the young women tell stories of fellow flight attendants who have simply slipped onto planes to their home countries and run away, without giving notice to the airline.

The most successful Arab flight attendants, they say, are often those whose circumstances have already placed them somehow at the margins of their home societies: young immigrant women who are supporting their families after the death of a male breadwinner, for example, and a handful of young widows and divorced women who are eventually permitted to work overseas after their prospects of remarriage have dimmed.

Far more than other jobs they might find in the gulf, flying makes it difficult for Muslim women to fulfill religious duties like praying five times a day and fasting during [Ramadan](#), the Egyptian attendant noted. She said she hoped to wear the hijab one day, “just not yet.” A sense of disconnection from their religion can add to feelings of alienation from conservative Muslim communities back home. Young women whose work in the gulf supports an extended family often find, to their surprise and chagrin, that work has made them unsuitable for life within that family.

“A very good Syrian friend of mine decided to resign from the airline and go back home,” the Egyptian flight attendant said. “But she can't tolerate living in a family house anymore. Her parents love her brother and put him first, and she's never allowed out alone, even if it's just to go and have a coffee.”

“It becomes very difficult to go home again,” she said.

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