Press Release: 24th November 2015
HODA AL-HELLAISI SPEAKS AT THE CAMBRIDGE UNION
“Behind the hijab, there is a human being”

On the 25th November 2015, the Cambridge Union Society welcomed, one of only 30 women on the Shura Council and one of the most senior women in Saudi politics, Hoda Al-Hellaisi. The discussion focused around stereotypes about Saudi Arabia and the condition of women in the country.

Hoda started off her speech by saying she wished to give the audience a different perspective of Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabian women than that given by Western media. When she was a child in London, she was taunted by her classmates who asked her is she “went to school on a camel” or “had an oil well in her backyard”. She says that “stereotyping is a result of ignorance” that eliminates the different cultural levels that exists in different societies. This is fine when you are a child but becomes a problem when these stereotypes endure with age. We all fall in the trap of stereotypes and we have all probably stereotyped in the past. We think of the French, Japanese or the Americans in certain terms. We think of Arabs as a uniform whole: terrorists. Hoda says we think of the Arab woman as a “black veiled woman without a vice or an identity. As a Saudi woman, I am not that woman. I am not a terrorist”.

Undeniably, she says Saudis are “partly to blame” for not publicising their culture. This is especially true for Saudi women. They do not publicise themselves to the world and do not say “we are like all women in the world: we dream, we shop and we gossip”. Being ignorant of a certain culture is acceptable however judgement and racism is unacceptable. She then went on to give some facts on Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a rapidly changing and emerging country with a population of 30 million, including 8 million foreigners. It is the world's largest oil producer and exporter. Before the revolution, Saudi Arabia was one of the world’s poorest country yet the massive oil wealth has had an impact on the country. Saudi Arabia is considered a regional power and is the only Arab country to be part of the G20. She says that the development that took play in Saudi Arabia in 60-70 years, “occurred in the West over hundred of years”. Hoda believes that “Saudi Arabia is interacting and has to interact with the rest of the world”.

She went on to discuss the importance of education to eradicate literacy and transform the country into a country that can compete on a global scale. This is why Saudi Arabia dedicated 30% of its budget to education in 2014. She believes this is fuelled by the fact that Saudi Arabia “understands that the greatest product of a nation is its youth”. You cannot speak of leadership in Saudi Arabia without speaking of the contribution of King Abdullah with whom such a project would’ve been “unimaginable”. The youth’s contribution to the development of Saudi Arabia also shows itself in participation in social media, with Saudi Arabians representing one third of the regions Tweets and Saudi Arabian members LinkedIn topping the region. This dynamic and connected youth “add to the blend of schools of thought that currently exist in Saudi Arabian society”.

She then said “now let us speak about us: the Saudi female”. She “depicts the epitomy of the unapproachable: does she have a face, even a voice?” It has been said that they live in an abusive, repressive climate and in ignorance. Hoda says that it is those journalists that don’t inquire about what Saudi Arabian women are like that are actually “abusive, repressive, and ignorant”. If a Westerner spoke to Saudi Arabian women, they would find that there are mixed feelings from women: some would be “happy to be wives dependant on husbands and brothers (…) others are angry and frustrated”. We must understand that “behind the hijab, there is a human being”. The government is making efforts for women by implementing reforms so women can have more job opportunities. Women are entering the
workplace at a fast rate: “in many cases, economic necessity brings women to the job market”. Change must occur from within and at Saudi Arabia’s own pace.”

To conclude, Hoda said she was “not here to justify or defend that we live in a perfect society. It is however to shed a new image of Saudi Arabia”. The image held by Saudi Arabia must and will change. We are one world “and must keep our doors open for dialogue, asking questions in order to understand each other”.

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For footage of the event go to https://www.youtube.com/user/cambridgeunionsoc