



CENTRE *Bouchra Marmoul, Morocco's first female jockey.*

Women's World of Racing

Story by Victoria Shaw • Images by Victoria Shaw and Morhaf Al Assaf

As some of the world's most established horse racing dominions still struggle with female participation...look out for the run towards the future with the women of the Middle East.

For well over a century, social historians and commentators have used horse racing as a societal barometer. The active participation of women in racing and their ability to engage in all aspects of the sport has tested and changed the social and employment expectations of females in any country in which racing takes place. The subsequent resurgence of interest in racing where many nations' populations may have survived fascism, communism or even a dictatorship has given way to new audiences in world regions where the sport has some of its earliest origins.

One constant theme in countries that enjoy horse racing is the challenge of including women within the sport. The further social ramifications and positive outcomes with women's involvement in horse racing, reach far beyond that of the outside running rail. However, for a country that has globally the third highest wagering figures from a population of just 24 million, Australia's current level of engagement for women stems from some very defiant beginnings.

Born in 1886 and orphaned, a young West Australian woman named **Wilhelmina Smith** lied about her sex to find work in an attempt to feed herself. Her incredible story of survival gave way to being the foremost Aussie female racing trailblazer. After cutting her hair short like a boy and working on West Australian fishing trawlers, Wilhelmina ended up in the **Cairns** region of far **North Queensland** where she adopted the initials 'C.S' and started to ride as a jockey. She acquired the nickname **Girlie Bill** because of her understandable reluctance to get undressed in front of other jockeys or use the lavatory during the day. The early twentieth



century in northern Queensland would have been a rather rough place, but **C.S Smith's** plucky tenacity and desire to defy the odds has left an enormous legacy for many women in racing. **In 1982** the infamous "**white line**" was acknowledged as an issue at Australian race tracks. The painted line on the ground was not to be crossed by women and effectively upheld an apartheid style system that divided a nation's gender at a racecourse and other sporting fixtures.

Only when the **41st Premier of Victoria John Cain**, discovered that his wife **Nancye** wasn't able to join him in making the presentation of the **Melbourne Cup** to the connections of the winning horse, was anything done to rectify this disgraceful situation, which was also in force at football and cricket grounds across the country.

The uproar and social outcry that followed that incident helped pave the way for equal opportunities for women to actively enjoy that which men had done for many years without question. Unhappily, some so-called enlightened nations of the Western world are also showing signs of a revival of sexist behaviour that is having a negative effect on women's opportunities in racing. A recent two kilogram blanket claim given to all French female jockeys by their national racing authority, in an attempt to provide them with more work as they are ignored by racehorse owners is further indication of the stagnating progress in the Western world.

However, what does give me great heart as a woman involved in racing, is the astonishing progress unfolding in the **Middle East** and surrounding regions. A big part of the emerging opportunities for women in the Arabic world and beyond who wish to be involved in racing, is the **His Highness**

Sheikh Mansoor Global Arabian Flat Racing Festival, which conducts races for purebred Arabian horses in the many host nations across the globe. The Festival engages professional and amateur female jockeys as well as apprentice riders of participating countries, thus providing an international racing experience that is both career and life enriching.

Thanks to the HH Sheikh Mansoor Global Arabian Flat Racing Festival, I have had great interaction with both men and women of many Islamic racing nations and it is clear that their desire to see their own women start to forge a career path in racing, is a source of great national pride. This is in stark contrast to the unnecessarily sexist attitude in many western countries where there is still a negative viewpoint towards women who are equal or even more qualified than their male racing counterparts.

To be personally invited to moderate the **Women in Racing Panel** at the HH Sheikh Mansoor Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Purebred Arabian Horse Racing Conference in **Marrakech, Morocco** in May this year was a truly fascinating opportunity. As an Australian woman, the chance to learn of the progressive developments for women in horse racing dominions of which the Western world is largely unaware, was extraordinary. Conversely, to listen to very accomplished women from great racing jurisdictions like France speak about the male bias they experience at home was an unpleasant surprise. In contrast, the support from the Middle East for French female horse trainers was heartwarming.

Of the women from all over the world that comprised my panel, horse trainer **Elizabeth Bernard** of France spoke of her difficulties and disappointment with the lack of consideration by French racehorse owners to engage her as a horse trainer. However, various Royal families of Arab nations have used Elizabeth's training services to great acclaim and her **Group 1** victories have led to ongoing opportunities for both Elizabeth and her many clients including the **Royal Cavalry of Oman**.

The live television broadcast of the Women in Racing panel further demonstrated to the assembled international audience the Islamic world's support and encouragement of women's participation in racing. Racehorse owner and breeder **Mouna Benjalleum** is a pioneer in her native Morocco. Only in the late 1990s were Moroccan women granted equal rights thanks to **His Majesty King Mohammed VI**. Today Mouna is one of Morocco's most prominent racehorse owners who also invests heavily in breeding technologies as, unlike thoroughbreds, artificial insemination is commonly used in purebred Arabian horse breeding.

Prior to King Mohammed ascending the Moroccan throne, Mouna would not have been able to race horses, let alone own any. In addition to Mouna's landmark position as a breeder and owner, horse racing management and development under the banner of Morocco's racing authority - **SOREC** also provides many employment opportunities for women in racing. In May 2015 in **Warsaw, Poland**, Morocco celebrated its inaugural racing victory by its first female jockey **Bouchra Marmoul**. With a recently established jockey school including further female participants, Moroccan women in racing have come a very long way in just two decades.

Great social reform and prospects for women of the Islamic world involved with horse racing was also revealed at the conference by the **Saudi Arabian** representative **Lojain Omran**, whose involvement so far centres around her use of social media to showcase racing to her several million followers. It was remarkable to hear from Lojain how she strives to promote women's opportunities that include racing, to her region of the world and beyond. Again, female participation was a key focus of the HH Sheikh Mansoor Festival.

Moza Almansoori, Human Resources Manager of one of the Festival's main sponsors, **National Feed and Flour** of the **United Arab Emirates**, emphasised the achievements of the HH Sheikh Mansoor Festival and related how her employees are very interested to see what National Feed and Flour sponsors, who are fully supportive of further engagements for women in racing.



Victoria Shaw



Lojain Omran



Elizabeth Bernard



Mouna Benjalleum



Lara Sawaya



LEFT Muneera Al Marzouqi and friends.



Jockeys Shathra Al Hajjaj of UAE and Azahar Al Wardi of Oman at Abu Dhabi.



Delegates engaged by the Women In Racing Panel



LEFT TO RIGHT - England's Derek Thompson. Elizabeth Bernard Horse trainer of France. Renee Koch of France, Horse breeder. Stephanie Corum of the USA, Journalist and Publisher. Victoria Shaw. Mouna Benjalleoun, Race horse owner and breeder of Morocco. Moza Almansoori, Human Resources Manager of UAE's National Feed & Flour. Muneera Al Marzouqi, UAE. Lara Sawaya, Executive Director of the HH Sheikh Mansoor Purebred Arabian Flat Racing Festival, UAE. Adnan Sultan Al Nuaimi, UAE. Mubarak Al Nuaimi, UAE Director of Overseas Promotion. Lojain Omran, Social Media, Saudi Arabia. Debbie Burt, UK Journalist and Publisher. Emirates Airlines representatives and Moroccan dignitaries representing SOREC.

It struck me while flying back to Australia from Morocco that so many Arabic countries have paved the way to incredible social reform that has changed not just opportunities for women in racing, but also societal expectations of womens' employment prospects far more quickly than most nations in the Western world. The last 20 years has witnessed enormous change for women in racing in the Arab region and great social progress of which countries like Australia are largely unaware. Reflecting on Australian racing history, it has taken us approximately 100 years since the first Australian female jockey rode illegally whilst pretending to be a man, to Michelle Payne's watershed victory in the 2015 Melbourne Cup aboard **Prince of Penzance**.

Amongst the current crop of Australia's leading jockeys there are several women with group one victories to their credit, yet despite winning at the highest level there are still numerous occasions where they are overlooked in favour of a male rider. The situation in France however is almost frightening by comparison. While the lack of equality is still disturbingly present in some of the most popular horse racing dominions, the Middle East is fast tracking womens' racing prospects at an incredible pace.

The progression of women's active engagement with horse racing in many nations today is championed by HH Sheikh Mansoor Bin Zayed Al Nahyan and his mother, **HH Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak** and is delivered to 86 countries by their Executive Director - **Lara Sawaya**. Lara was also a speaker on my panel in Morocco, with the ability and wonderful insight to bring us all together to learn and share from each others' experiences. Lara travels the world extending opportunities to women in racing at the direction of HH Sheikh Mansoor and HH Sheikha Fatima.

The Royal family of Abu Dhabi continues to provide a racing platform for women all over the world and so many of us are incredibly thankful for the generosity and progressive ways of the United Arab Emirates. It will be very interesting to see what social and racing historians will say long after we have passed, about the enormous contribution to the racetracks and broader social fabric of the world by Islamic nations that have sincerely embraced womens' opportunities in racing, at a rate that far eclipses so many more established western nations. 🐎