



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Gulf Women in the Workforce



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Introduction

In response to the changing geopolitical landscape, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have each launched their own version of a long-term national vision, prioritizing key objectives and targets in line with their national interests. Since the establishment of the GCC on May 25, 1981, in Abu Dhabi, the six member countries-- Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have experienced significant social and economic changes. More recently, in their effort to diversify their economies away from their traditional dependence on oil and hydrocarbons, as well as to become more competitive on the international stage, the GCC countries have taken the emerging global challenges and turned them into opportunities.

While the contents of each states' national agendas vary, one common objective for the Gulf countries is encouraging and increasing women's participation in the workforce. Thus, women have been the cornerstone in recent reforms and initiatives throughout the Gulf and have played an important role in the diversification of their economies. This paper will look at how the Gulf states have pushed for female empowerment and gender equality to balance their workforce, as well as reduce dependency on expatriate labor. Despite tremendous developments in recent years, this paper argues that there remains significant room for improvement in women's participation in the workforce. The report will highlight the current situation in the GCC when it comes to women in the workforce, address challenges facing the region, and provide recommendations for positively impacting female representation in the Gulf labor market.

Overview

It has been estimated that increased female employment participation could increase GDP across the MENA region by 57 percent, or as much as \$2.0 trillion (PwC, 2022). Given the socioeconomic and political importance of increasing women's participation in the workforce, all of the GCC states have made empowering women a central pillar in their respective national plans. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has made gender equality a vital sector of focus in its Vision 2030. A primary commitment in Vision 2030 is providing equal opportunities for both men and women. As stated in the Saudi Vision 2030 document, "Saudi women are yet another great asset. With over 50 percent of our university graduates being female, we will continue to develop their talents, invest in their productive capabilities and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our society and economy." Significant objectives by 2030 include lowering the overall rate of unemployment from 11.6 percent to 7 percent and increasing women's participation in the workforce from 22 percent to 30 percent (Saudi Vision 2030).

Similarly, the UAE has introduced gender reforms to support women's labor force participation. Consequently, the female labor force participation rate in the UAE is one of the highest in the MENA region. Historic reforms were introduced in 2019 under the Gender Balance Council that introduced legislation on combating violence and harassment in the workplace, prohibited gender-based discrimination in employment, and removed job restrictions on women in male dominated sectors. (Hamel & Dexter, 2021). In 2021, the UAE became the first country in the MENA region to grant paternity leave for employees in the private sector (World Economic Forum, 2022). Labor legislation was also amended to ensure equal compensation for work of equal value.



In Kuwait, seven objectives have been established in accordance with the development plan, New Kuwait 2035, in order to improve the role of women in the workforce. Kuwait's Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development, Dr. Khalid Mahdi, stated that New Kuwait 2035 aims to have women occupy 35 percent of executive roles in compliance with the fifth goal of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SGD 5) (Kuwait Times, 2022). Kuwait has also launched a platform called Kuwaiti Women Leaders for Change to promote women's participation in the workforce.

Oman has installed a range of reform initiatives to promote female participation in the workforce. Oman was the first Gulf Arab nation to grant women the right to vote and run for office, and consequently, many Omani women have been appointed to ministerial positions (Liloia, 2022). Oman's Vision 2040 also is focused on enhancing skill development for women and empowering them by enhancing their opportunities. In October 2022, Oman's Ministry of Social Development launched a two-day forum titled "Omani Women: Indicators of Economic and Knowledge Empowerment Within Oman Vision 2040." The forum focused on the latest trends and objectives towards enhancing the indicators of empowering Omani women based on Oman Vision 2040 (ONA, 2022).

In Bahrain, advancing women's rights and empowering them in the workforce are key pillars of the Kingdom's national initiative. The Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 centers on both the advancement and sustainability of Bahraini women (Jahani, 2022). Bahrain has also established the Supreme Council for Women (SCW), which is committed to promoting gender equality and inclusion of women by "addressing women's needs in order to unlock their full potential and

contribute to the society on a broader spectrum" (Kingdom of Bahrain, 2023). The SCW has also mandated Equal Opportunity Committees at all Bahraini public and private-sector organizations in 2022 (Locke, 2022).

Qatar has made "a capable and motivated workforce" one of the leading human development outcomes in its National Vision 2030. Specifically, Qatar has been keen on empowering more women to participate in the workforce and increasing "opportunities and vocational support for Qatari women [through] broad investments in certification and training programs by public and private institutions, incentives for Qataris to enter professional and management roles in business, health and educational sectors, and high quality training opportunities for all citizens, corresponding to their ambitions and abilities" (Qatar National Vision 2030). One significant commitment in the Vision is enhancing women's capacities and empowering them to "participate fully in the political and economic spheres, especially in decision-making roles" (Qatar National Vision 2030).

Overall, the GCC states have prohibited discrimination in wages for women and men having the same roles and working conditions. Government initiatives further seek to achieve a cohesive approach to gender equality in numerous professions by strengthening the legal protections, educational opportunities, and social awareness that support them. Recent reforms by the GCC states have aimed to ensure that women's rights are protected by laws and regulations that give them more autonomy and involvement in personal decision-making. These established reforms have also committed to promoting equality in pay, education and training, grants and subsidies, and female healthcare considerations in the workplace.

Contextual Analysis

The GCC is therefore advancing gender equality and female empowerment in the workforce through national reforms and initiatives. Consequently, the World Economic Forum's 2022 Global Gender Gap Report lists Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as this year's most improved countries in the region compared to 2021. Specifically, Saudi Arabia, at 63.6 percent (+3.3 percentage points), was listed as one of 2022's most improved countries in closing their gender gap (World Economic Forum, 2022). Table 1 below shows the Global Gender Gap Index rankings of the six GCC countries (out of 13 countries) in the MENA region in 2022.

Table 1: Global Gender Gap Index Rankings of GCC Countries in MENA, 2022

Country	Rank		Score (0-1)
	Regional	Global	
United Arab Emirates	2	68	0.716
Saudi Arabia	6	127	0.636
Kuwait	8	130	0.632
Bahrain	9	131	0.632
Qatar	11	137	0.617
Oman	12	139	0.609

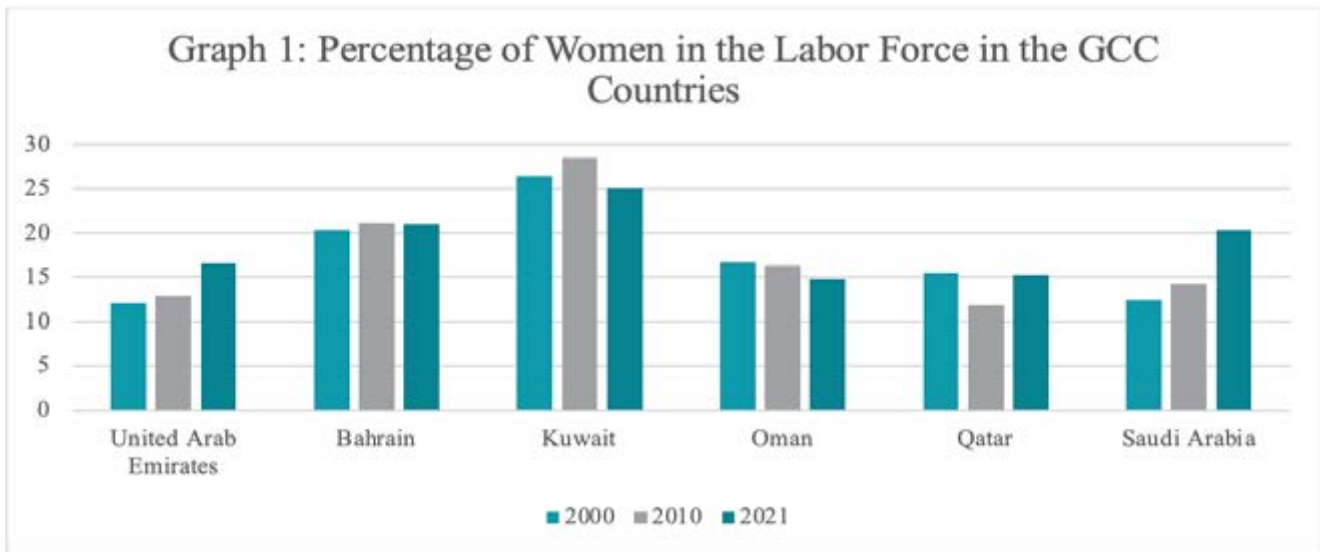
Source: World Economic Forum, 2022

The effects of Saudi Arabia's initiatives and reforms can be seen and felt within the Kingdom and abroad. In February 2019, HRH Princess Reema bint Bandar was appointed as the Kingdom's ambassador to the United States, becoming the first female Saudi ambassador. More than 51,000 Saudi women entered the workforce in 2020 alone (Freer, 2022). In 2021, women's participation rate in the workforce was 35.6 percent, surpassing the 30 percent goal in Vision 2030 (Saikali, 2022). In March 2022, Saudi women comprised 33.6 percent of the Saudi workforce, up from 17.4 percent just five years ago, and had the lowest unemployment rate in 20 years at 20.2 percent (Alshammari, 2022). However, Saudi women's participation rates bounced back up to 35.6% in the second

quarter of 2022, and the female unemployment rate decreased to 19.3 percent (Saikali, 2022).

Bahrain has seen a rise in female employment since the implementation of its initiatives. What's more, there has been an increase in the number of women holding official positions within the government. In 2020, women in the Legislative Authority comprised 19 percent of the participations: 15 percent within the parliament, 23 percent within the Shura Council, and 23 percent in the Municipal Council (Kingdom of Bahrain, 2023). Additionally, the Secretary General of the SCW, Hala Al-Ansari, stated that due to these reforms, women in Bahrain account for 49 percent of the workforce, surpassing the global average of 47 percent (Bahrain News Agency, 2021).

However, despite the progress made in gender equality, Gulf women's participation in the labor force remains low, at about 18.8 percent, compared to the global average of 39.3 percent (World Bank, 2021). In 2021, women in Kuwait had the highest labor force participation percentage ratio of the total labor force at 25 percent, followed by Bahrain (21.1 percent), Saudi Arabia (20.4 percent), the UAE (16.6 percent), Qatar (15.3 percent), and finally Oman (14.8 percent), according to the World Bank. Graph 1 below shows the percentage of women in the labor force in the six GCC countries in 2000, 2010, and 2021. Out of the Gulf women in the workforce, only 40 percent of working-age women are employed, compared with 64 percent across the OECD (PwC, 2022). Moreover, according to the World Economic Forum's 2022 Global Gender Gap Report, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has the second-largest gender gap to close, after South Asia, with an average population-weighted score of 63.4 percent.



Source: World Bank, 2021

Additionally, women in the Gulf have primarily been employed in the private sector and have only recently made their way into the public sphere, given social restrictions that were previously in place. Women employment in the public sector, as a whole, has tended to increase over time in all MENA countries (Assaad & Barsoum, 2019). In terms of leadership positions, within the Gulf, the UAE’s cabinet has the most significant number of women ministers at 27 percent, whereas Bahrain’s cabinet has 20 percent, Qatar’s cabinet has 16 percent, Oman’s cabinet has 13 percent, and Kuwait has 12 percent. While Saudi Arabia does not have a female minister yet, the Kingdom appointed in 2022 a female vice minister of tourism, HH Haifa bint Mohammed Al Saud and the first female deputy secretary general of the Saudi cabinet, Ms. Shihana Alazzaz. In 2020, the percentage of seats in representative bodies in the GCC countries was as follows: 50 percent in the UAE, 20 percent in Saudi Arabia, 15 percent in Bahrain, 10 percent in Qatar, 6 percent in Kuwait, and 2 percent in Oman (World Bank, 2020). Comparatively, women held 26 percent of seats, globally. In Kuwait in 2022, 27 women submitted a candidacy registration for the Kuwaiti National Assembly out of a total of 376 registrations. However, out of the 27 women, only two were elected out of the 50 seats (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2022) (Al Arabiya, 2022). Thus, it is

clear that, despite historic reforms, there is still significant room for improvement in terms of women filling leadership positions.

Moving Forward

While the Gulf launched initiatives to promote female participation and improve conditions across the labor sector, Gulf women have faced some obstacles rooted in traditional cultural perceptions from the Gulf societies. Here, the challenge the GCC faces can be broken down into two parts: enabling society and re-engineering the economy (Bakr, 2022). Women in the Gulf continue to face challenges due to environmental factors, such as conservative, ideological, and socioeconomic influences. These factors continue to exert some constraints on realizing the potential of Gulf women in the workforce and their ability to contribute to the economy (Bakr, 2022). One key issue here is maintaining support for social change, particularly support from the society for Gulf women.

There is an inherent danger when quotas are imposed. Women’s full inclusion in their roles at the workplace could potentially be diminished to merely fulfilling a mandated requirement. Additionally, employers might fall into a new type



of recruiter bias, where employers hire women on the basis of gender rather than their qualification. As a result, women would feel that they have been hired for the job because the balance was required rather than being employed for their skills. The persistence of a larger number of women in higher education as compared to men demonstrates that women have a high skill level and continue to develop these skills over time. Thus, these gender quotas must have greater attention to ensure the full participation of women in the workforce. This is particularly important in regard to increasing women's presence and inclusion in diplomatic activity as well as reducing male dominance in senior posts in politics and all other sectors. In other words, women must play an active role in policy formation and agenda setting and so on, in order to move toward gender equality. The key here is involving women in the policy formulation process at the outset to gain a female perspective and include women in carrying out the decisions reached through diverse views.

One policy the GCC countries can enact is to set national quotas in both the public and private sectors. Saudi Arabia is the only country in the GCC to issue a mandated gender quota in legislative bodies: The Shura Council has a mandated 20 percent quota, which is 30 seats out of the 150 total seats, since King Abdullah's royal decree in 2013 (Alhashmi, 2018). This gender quota increased the Kingdom's female representation from 0 percent in 2013 to the current 20 percent. Therefore, gender quotas are effective top-down policies that will increase women's representation in the political arena.

The European Union (EU) provides a good example of how effective gender quotas can be. In the EU, 11 member states have introduced national gender quotas for election to their national parliament. The proportion of women members of parliament has increased three times faster in countries with gender quotas, such as Ireland, Spain, Luxembourg, Poland, and Slovenia, as opposed to countries without quotas (European

Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). Serbia came close to reaching a gender-balanced parliament after achieving 37 percent in 2020, surpassing its mandate of 35 percent. Moreover, the European Institute for Gender Equality reports that women in six countries with gender quotas (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Austria, and Portugal) averaged 37.6 percent on corporate boards, compared to countries without a quota, who had an average share of 24.3 percent female board members. Moreover, the rate of women on boards in those six countries increased by an average of 0.9 percentage points each year before the quota



was introduced and spiked to an average increase of 3.0 percentage points per year after the quota was introduced, whereas countries without quotas increased at a mere 0.7 percentage points per year (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). Another policy for enhancing women's participation in the work force is expanding



sectors where women are excelling, such as entrepreneurship and women-owned small businesses. The Gulf countries should create and expand vocational training programs and awareness campaigns to facilitate female employment in these sectors. One example here is the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), which organizes workshops and programs to facilitate female entry into the workforce.

The programs provide Gulf women with relevant information for jobs and skills, easing the time-consuming process of finding jobs matching their skillset. In addition, online programs will facilitate female employment by leading to the inclusion of women that are currently qualified, but not working due to logistic and familial obstacles.

Saudi Arabia has implemented several online platforms to ensure the ease of involving women in the workforce. Such initiatives include:

- (1) Tamheer Program-- a government service that aims to train graduates and develop their skills for jobs in the private sector.
- (2) Wusool Program-- a government-run transportation program provided by the Human Resources Development Fund (Hadaf) for working women. The program is dedicated to raising Saudi women's participation in the labor market by helping them overcome transportation difficulties.
- (3) Qurrah Program-- a government-run transportation program provided by the Human Resources Development Fund (Hadaf) that provides childcare services in support of empowering women in the workforce.
- (4) Qiyadat Global Program-- a collaboration between Saudi Arabia and Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business in the United States. The objective of the program is to "provide emerging women leaders with an intense learning program focused on practical

strategic leadership skills for effectively managing and overcoming challenges faced by female leaders" (Qiyadat Global – Georgetown, 2023).

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These programs and initiatives have been successful in empowering women and facilitating their participation in the workforce.

Lastly, the GCC countries should set programs in place that train women in traditionally underrepresented sectors, such as in technical fields. Here, education plays a vital role. Despite the low female participation rates in the labor force, women are among the most highly educated demographic groups in the GCC. Gulf women have traditionally excelled in the fields of business, law, education, health, and humanities. Conversely, the fields of engineering and construction have been male dominated. According to the 2022 Global Gender Gap Report, the Middle East and North Africa region achieved 96.2% of gender parity regarding educational attainment. Oman is among the only four countries in the region that have closed less than 95% of the gender gap on this subindex (World Economic Forum, 2022). Table 2 below shows the Educational Attainment rankings of the six GCC countries in 2022.



Table 2: Educational Attainment Rankings of GCC Countries, 2022

Country	Rank	Score (0-1)
Kuwait	47	0.997
United Arab Emirates	49	0.997
Bahrain	54	0.995
Qatar	83	0.987
Saudi Arabia	93	0.979
Oman	113	0.950

Source: World Economic Forum, 2022

All six GCC states have made improving education a central pillar in their respective national plans. For instance, education is one of Saudi Arabia’s key sectors of focus in its Vision 2030. Significant objectives related to education include improving equal access to education, improving fundamental learning outcomes, improving the ranking of educational institutions, and ensuring the alignment of educational outputs with labor market needs (Saudi Vision 2030).

However, despite excelling in education in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines, women in the Gulf continue to be a minority in the STEM workforce. One way to increase female employment in STEM roles would be to create a pre-graduate program that equips female students with the networking and skills to give them a competitive advantage in the application process at STEM companies upon graduation. With the many mega projects being planned throughout the Gulf, such as Saudi Arabia’s NEOM, Red Sear Project, and Qiddiya, now is the time to begin pushing for the inclusion of more women in senior positions. The rapid growth and transformation across the Gulf region means ample opportunities for women to be positioned in highly influential, top-ranking, and well-paid leadership positions. However, education must first be clearly highlighted as one of, if not the main, driving force for promoting women’s participation in the workforce.



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Conclusion

In conclusion, Gulf women have generally been making positive strides and achievements in the workforce in recent years. The GCC states are on the right track when it comes to female empowerment and gender equality. However, despite the historic reforms and accomplishments, women in the Gulf workforce are still underrepresented, especially when it comes to leadership positions. Additionally, they continue to face some obstacles rooted in traditional cultural perceptions from Gulf societies. However, effective top-down policies, such as gender quotas and mandatory training programs, will increase women’s representation in the workforce, further empowering them across different sectors and laying the groundwork for the daughters of generations to come.



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