



Insights on women's labor participation in Gulf Cooperation Council countries

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Abstract In analyzing the many stereotypes surrounding Arab Middle Eastern women's employment issues, this article focuses on women's labor participation and their career development in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. We first unpack the stereotypes by demonstrating the progress of women's labor participation in the region. We then uncover the critical challenges of a high female unemployment rate during GCC countries' economic transformation in the non-oil sectors. We discuss the factors contributing to low women's labor participation and the difficulty of career advancement for women, including (1) norms and traditions; (2) job opportunities and workplace discrimination; and (3) role models, mentors, and networking. Finally, we provide recommendations on how to improve women's labor participation by involving the public and private sectors, deploying technology, and engaging in multilevel mindset change.

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1. Women's labor participation in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Another look

Gender equality is at the forefront of the global humanitarian agenda in the 21st century (Joshi, Neely, Emrich, Griffiths, & George, 2015).

With the increasing role that women play in society and in business, there is an urgent need to better understand women's labor participation, career development, and management leadership globally. Previous research found that women often encounter numerous disadvantages that lead to gender differences in career success, including lack of access to powerful mentors and the stereotypical belief that women do not possess the necessary qualities to succeed (Heilman, 2012; Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010; Leslie, Manchester, & Dahm, 2017).

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In the Arab world, long-standing gender stereotypes exist. Although there is a portrayal of self-reliant women, a recent investigation of consumers' perceived social representation of Arab women in the mass media confirmed that most other classical stereotypical portrayals of women are also present: Women are seen as homemakers, physically beautiful, and dependent on men (Negm, 2017). As Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries¹ outperform other non-GCC Arab countries on a number of fronts, including gender-related index (Nissan & Niroomand, 2015), we chose to examine issues related to women's labor participation in GCC countries.

Due to GCC's traditional and religious contexts, the challenges faced by women are expected to be much more pronounced than in Western countries. Arab women have limited options in developing their own professional path. In light of this, we provide an overview of women's labor participation in the Middle East, unpack the stereotypes surrounding women's labor participation in the region, and discuss how they act as a barrier to women's professional advancement. As one female executive who participated in the *Women in Business in the United Arab Emirates (2017)* panel said: "There are consistent, routine, and profound biases on a subconscious level; both men and women contribute to that, and positive images are encouraged to bust stereotypes."

The labor market in the GCC has undergone a restructuring process, driven by the need to move from a commodity-dependent allocative state economic model to a more diversified and knowledge-based one, and to increase the competitiveness of its non-oil sectors globally (Rutledge, Al-Shamsi, Bassioni, & Al-Sheikh, 2011). With its increasingly diversified business portfolio and economic growth, the underutilization and underemployment of women in the GCC is not sustainable. These issues surrounding women's labor—the high percentage of the workforce remaining untapped, the unsustainability involved with excluding women, and the economic realities and necessities—are compelling society at large to change its perception of working women (Allam, 2012). This is especially critical if the GCC wants to advance in a competitive environment; the energy, knowledge, and skills of its entire population need to be capitalized, including women—who represent half of the population (Aguirre, Cavanaugh, & Sabbagh, 2011). In this article, we address these three questions:

1. What is the current status of women's labor participation in the GCC?
2. What are the contributing factors to the low women's labor participation and the barriers to women's career advancement in the GCC?
3. What actions can be taken to increase women's labor participation in the GCC?

1.1. Facts on GCC's female population

In order to fully understand the status of women's labor participation in the GCC, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of the region's female population. The GCC has one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age at 30.3 and 27.2 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, respectively (ACCA, 2017). The World Bank reported that the GCC's population reached 48.7 million in 2013—a 300% increase in 10 years—and was 60% male and 40% female. The gender ratio in the GCC is considerably lower than other developed and developing nations and the female literacy rate is 91% compared to that of 94% for men. Males and females do have similar school enrollment rates at the primary level but, surprisingly, female enrollment rates at the secondary (90% vs. 88%) and tertiary (40% vs. 23%) levels are higher than those of males (Al Masah Capital Limited, 2015).

The socioeconomic position of women in the GCC has evolved over the past decade. The level of education attained by GCC women empowers them to better their lives and advance their careers. Women in the GCC are now marrying in their late 20s or early 30s in order to focus on their education and career, they are more independent socially and financially, and many more choose to remain single. They are also becoming wealthier, controlling roughly 33% of the wealth in the region. Due to this increasing social and financial independence, divorce rates in the GCC have also increased dramatically; the divorce rate is 37.1%, 34.8%, 25.6%, and 24% in Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, and Bahrain, respectively (Al Masah Capital Limited, 2015).

2. What is the current status of women's labor participation in the GCC?

Women's labor participation rates have increased steadily over the past few decades in the GCC (Al-Waqfi & Abdalla Al-faki, 2015). Despite this

¹ The GCC countries are: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

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