



Students at the Abu Dhabi Women's College, UAE, 2004.

More Educated, Less Employed: The Paradox of Women's Employment in the Gulf

by Karen E. Young

There is a paradox in women's achievement across the Gulf states. By most international standards, female citizens of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have good access to education systems, affordable and proficient health care and social services. Women are graduating from university in higher numbers than men, maternal health risks are low and childcare and family support services are plentiful. However, women in the Gulf remain marginalized and, in some sectors, nearly invisible from the workforce. In particular, women are most absent from economic life in the private sector.

The women's employment paradox in the Gulf states means that there is an abundance of wealth in human capital that is not being utilized to its full potential. Those young women who hold higher education or other advanced degrees are more likely to be unemployed. In Saudi Arabia, as much as 80 percent of female job-seekers hold university degrees. While Gulf governments may be eager to prioritize the hiring of nationals—especially in the private sector—cultural and structural barriers continue to hinder women's economic inclusion. The variation in women's employment across the Gulf states—particularly among nationals—begs the question of how policy changes may create new opportunities and incentive structures for women.

The employment lag

Across the GCC region, employment opportunity trails behind educational achievement—with some important case variation.¹ Kuwait has been successful in achieving more equal participation of women in the workforce, along with high rates of educational attainment. Women make up more than 65 percent of university degree holders in Kuwait.² According to a 2014 survey by the Public Authority for Civil Information, Kuwaiti women constitute close to half of employed citizens, or 197,836 out of a total workforce of 422,325. About half of public sector employees are Kuwaiti women as well—or at least 160,087 of 336,977 state employees as of June 2016.³

Yet beyond Kuwait, women are highly underrepresented in the region's workforce. The disparity in educational attainment and economic participation is most striking in Saudi Arabia, perhaps unsurprisingly, where women's opportunity to engage fully in the workforce faces many institutional and social barriers. Indeed, women in Saudi Arabia make up just over six percent of the workforce. In Qatar, 54 percent of university-age women enroll in higher education compared to only 28 percent of men. Qatari women have some of the highest female literacy rates in the region, at 98.3 percent.⁴ Yet Qatari women are the second-least visible in terms of their participation in the private sector workforce. In the UAE, 41 percent of university-age women are enrolled in higher education compared to only 22 percent of men. But only 42 percent of working-age women compared to 92 percent of men are employed or actively looking for work.⁵ At 52 percent, the global employment average is not much better, but the 97 percent female literacy rate in the UAE is much higher than the global literacy average of 84 percent.⁶

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National vs non-national women

The picture is somewhat complicated by the large number of expatriate workers in the Gulf states. Non-national women are proportionally more present across the GCC—nearly two to one—in the labor force than national women.⁷ This suggests that being a woman is not a wholesale barrier to employment, but rather being a national is. For national women, social and religious norms about employment outside the home—and in mixed-gender environments—are changing. But these customs continue to pose barriers to women's participation in the economy.⁸

Bahrain and Kuwait are the GCC states with the highest labor participation rates of national and non-national women. It is generally easier to be a working woman, regardless of nationality, in both of these countries. In Qatar and the UAE, the two Gulf states with the highest ratio of expatriate workers (who are predominately male) to citizens, there are lower rates of female labor force participation.

In some cases, we see large numbers of non-national women also absent from the workforce. These are the trailing spouses of the expatriate community. In the UAE, data from the Gulf Labour Market and Migration project revealed a total population of 1.3 million women in 2005.⁹ Non-national women in the UAE working and registered in the private sector numbered 114,717 in 2005, out of a total non-national private sector workforce of over 2.2 million people.¹⁰

Resource wealth alone does not seem to be a deterrent to women's employment. Bahrain and Kuwait are highly dependent on oil revenue as a source of government outlays, but women tend to be more present in

II. Analysis

the workforce in both countries. Not coincidentally, they are also able to access and engage with legislative institutions. Whereas in other states where resource wealth has been more abundant (as measured in per capita income), there are more mixed results. Heavily resource-dependent states with declining resource wealth might be creating economic incentives for women to work. This suggests that the most important factor is indeed political liberalization. The most women-friendly economies in the Gulf also tend to have the most active legislative systems and representative institutions.

Women and the private sector

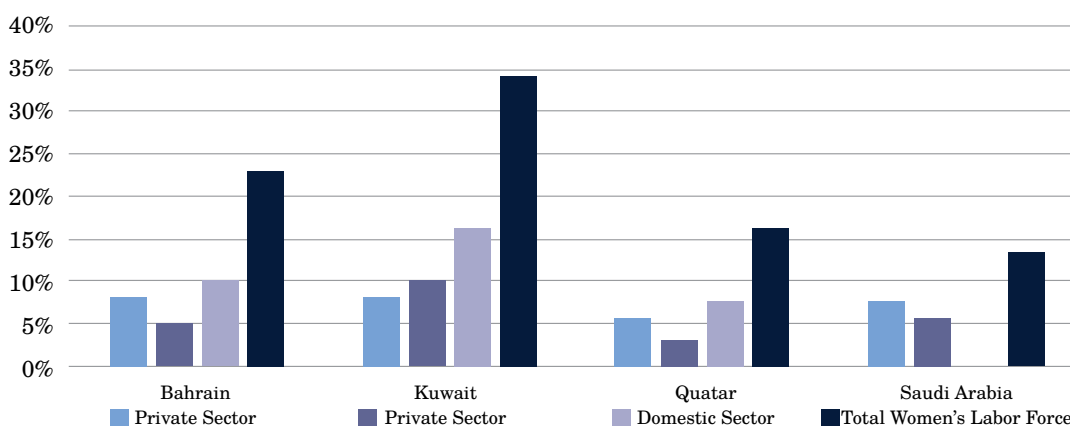
Of the places in which national women have found employment, they are over-represented as a whole among government employees (see Figure 1). A large amount of women's work is neither officially public nor private, and takes place in the home. The domestic service sector is almost entirely filled by non-national females, which can account for larger numbers of working women (where they are tabulated this way). These jobs reinforce norms about what work is and isn't appropriate for women.

Likewise, the high rates of national women employed in the public rather than the private sector has cultural and social implications. National women might be discouraged to join private sector workplaces dominated by both men and non-national women. The invisibility of national women in private sector workplaces means that women are less likely to find mentors and role models for their own career trajectories, adding further obstacles for them to break through as female employees. Between 2011 and 2012, as part of a grant from the Middle East Partnership Initiative of the US State Department, a women's networking program in the UAE geared toward matching young graduates with women in public policy and legal careers demonstrated how mentoring programs help break down barriers and ease introductions.¹¹ Yet there are simply less women in senior roles to meet the mentoring needs of a growing population of working Emirati women.

Future trends

Recent reports on the future of work and the use of technology to help people—particularly women—work from home, in part-time capacities or more informal settings could have some benefit in shifting cultural attitudes toward women in the workplace.¹² Structural issues, such as the *kafala* system and the consistent pay and benefits differentials between private and public sector employment, remain obstacles for national women to join the private sector. Legal barriers to women's financial and physical mobility also vary considerably throughout the Gulf, and can pose significant barriers to employment for women in some countries.¹³

Figure 1: Women's Labor Force by Country and Sector¹⁴



Yet despite these obstacles, women are poised to play a significant role in the next phase of Gulf economic development. They are now more than ever needed as a source of labor, and have become an explicit part of government diversification efforts in an era of declining oil and gas revenues. Even in Saudi Arabia, Saudi Vision 2030 has stipulated increasing women's employment as an important development goal, particularly in the private sector. But the challenge will be the same as it has been for the last decade: ensuring women transition from educational attainment to successful careers in the workforce.

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- ¹ Ridge, Natasha. *Education and the Reverse Gender Divide in the Gulf States*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
 - ² "Education Status by Age and Gender." Public Authority for Civil Information, Kuwait Government. December 2014. <http://stat.paci.gov.kw/englishreports/#DataTabPlace:ColumnChartWorkAge>
 - ³ "Work Status by Age and Gender." Public Authority for Civil Information, Kuwait Government. June 2016. <http://stat.paci.gov.kw/englishreports/#DataTabPlace:ColumnChartMaritalAge>
 - ⁴ "At a glance: Qatar." UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/qatar_statistics.html
 - ⁵ "MENA Gender Equality Profile: Status of Girls and Women in the Middle East and North Africa." UNICEF, United Arab Emirates, 2011.
 - ⁶ "Adult and Youth Literacy: National, Regional and Global Trends, 1985-2015." UNESCO, Montreal, 2013.
 - ⁷ "Employed national and non-national populations by sex, and sex ratios in GCC countries." Gulf Labour Markets and Migration. <http://gulfmigration.eu/employed-national-and-non-national-populations-by-sex-and-sex-ratios-in-gcc-countries-national-statistics-last-year-or-period-available/>
 - ⁸ "GCC Women in Leadership — from the first to the norm." McKinsey & Company, 2014. http://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey%20Offices/Middle%20East/Latest%20thinking/GCC_Women_In_Leadership_FINAL.ashx
 - ⁹ "UAE: Population by nationality (Emirati/Non-Emirati), sex and Emirate (2005)." Gulf Labour Markets and Migration Project. <http://gulfmigration.eu/uae-population-by-nationality-emirati-non-emirati-sex-and-emirate-2005/>
 - ¹⁰ "UAE: "Foreign labourers employed in the private sector and registered with the Ministry of Labour by nationality group / selected countries of citizenship and sex (2005-2007)." Gulf Labour Markets and Migration. <http://gulfmigration.eu/uae-foreign-labourers-employed-in-the-private-sector-and-registered-with-the-ministry-of-labour-by-nationality-group-selected-countries-of-citizenship-and-sex-2005-2007/>
 - ¹¹ Program was led by the author.
 - ¹² Overdahl, Stian. "It's Time to Face the Future." *Bloomberg Businessweek*. May 16-31, 2016.
 - ¹³ Aldosari, Hala. "The Personal is Political: Gender Identity in the Personal Status Laws of the Gulf Arab States." The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, Washington, 2016.
 - ¹⁴ The data was based on each country's most recent figures and includes all women (nationals and non-nationals). There was not enough data on Oman and the UAE to include them in the graph. Nor were there any figures on women's labor participation in the domestic sector in Saudi Arabia.
Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration: Bahrain; "Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) -- Bahrain," Kuwait; Public Authority for Civil Information," Qatar; "Labour Force Sample Surveys, 2006 to 2009 and 2011 to 2013; Census 2010 (Qatar)," Saudi Arabia; "Labour Force Surveys."