

Foreword

by *Lubna Qassim*



I'm delighted that this edition of *Gulf Affairs* focuses on gender equality in the region and offers interesting insights on how the Gulf states can take actions that will empower women and reach gender parity.

My work in this area formally began in 2008 when the World Economic Forum invited me to become a member of their Gender Parity Group. It was a project that was dear to me, as my interest in this field began in earnest decades before when I qualified as a lawyer in 1999 in the United Arab Emirates. I saw first-hand the gender bias and unequal treatment women were subjected to—whether through deliberate actions or subconscious behavior. The legal profession is a very male dominated profession across both the East and West.

In the last ten years, I have seen phenomenal progress worldwide but also in particular in the Gulf region when it comes to more women entering the labor force. I've also seen many women reach senior roles in the private sector and secure leadership roles in politics. All of this has been a major gain for women's empowerment.

However, the most recent Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum doesn't share the same enthusiasm. It describes 2017 as a bad year in an otherwise good decade for women. The report concluded that the gender gap across health, education, politics, and the workplace actually widened for the first time since the group began tracking these indices in 2006. The reversal was mainly driven by declining gender equality in the workplace and political representation.

Today, a total of 68 percent of the world's gender gap has been closed. Yet clearly more needs to be done. And in the Gulf countries, and in particular the UAE, strong and positive progress has been made in the last year. Countries outside the region, including France and Canada, have also recently made huge strides toward gender parity. Iceland remains the world's most gender-equal country, while the United States sadly dropped four spots to reach no. 49 in the Global Gender Gap Index.

The World Economic Forum's report as well as a large body of research suggests that at the current rate of progress, the global gender gap will take 100 years to close. That's a 17-year drop compared to 2017's estimate of 83 years. Despite tremendous efforts, the global workplace gender gap more specifically will now take 217 years to close. That's too bad because a number of academic and economic studies continue to link gender parity to better economic performance, aside from the obvious human and social benefits of gender equality.

I strongly believe that as we move from the era of capitalism into the era of talentism, the competitiveness and prosperity of a company or a nation will be based primarily on how well people or groups adapt to changing times. At the core of this will be integrating women as an important societal force in a way that unleashes their full talent and potential for the benefit of all. Together we can create a new era that is more just, resilient, and inclusive of all.

Lubna Qassim is a global lawyer and an advocate for better corporate governance and diversity in the workplace. She is the founding chair of the Gulf Cooperation Council's chapter of the 30% Club, and was recently named as one of the 50 most influential females in the Arab World by Arabian Business magazine.