



### **Mohammad Naciri Regional Director UN WOMEN Arab States**

**Gulf Affairs: What is the mission of UN WOMEN Arab States? Does the organization work directly with Gulf countries? If so, in what ways?**

**Mohammad Naciri:** UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. In the Arab states, we work with governments, civil society, women’s rights activists, and men and women to advance women’s empowerment and gender equality. We mainly do this by focusing on a few areas, including increased economic empowerment, women’s leadership and participation, and ending violence against women and girls. More specifically, we work on an enhanced legislative and policy environment that is conducive to women’s rights, gender responsive budgeting, and supporting member states in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably Goal 5—*Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*. In addition, we coordinate the women’s empowerment agenda in the UN system.

We do work with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries directly, and we currently have programming in or with the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait. In all countries, even beyond the Gulf region, we work in partnership with government—they are our main counterparts and also finance in-country programming to

help create a more equal society. In Kuwait, we launched the first regional program on accelerating SDG 5, including establishing an incubator for women's political leadership in the country. We also work with the private sector to encourage a more equal work environment.

**Gulf Affairs: One of UN Women's stated goals is to increase female participation in leadership positions. As a man leading this effort in the Arab states, is this not antithetical to the agency's goals?**

**Naciri:** I get this question a lot—and I respect that. I am humbled to be working with incredible women leaders from the region and beyond, and certainly they are the ones who drive the agenda. In our offices, the majority of the workforce—both at the managerial and working level—are women. That said, I appreciate that it may seem odd to have a man as the face of the organization in the region—but I am a strong believer in equality and in women's leadership. In fact, across the UN system, UN Women being the exception, there is a disproportion in leadership positions, with more men than women. In the Gulf region, I have tried to address this shortfall by establishing an Arab women leadership track, investing in women's leadership, and getting buy-in from other UN agencies to do the same. I am certain that down the road, I will be working for one of these women, and I would be honored to do so.

**Gulf Affairs: How do you rate the status of gender equality in the GCC region? How does it vary among the different GCC states?**

**Naciri:** I would rate the overall status as still a work in progress, with the positive caveat that this is something that the states themselves are aware of. Having committed themselves to the SDGs, Gulf leaders are working toward reaching them. While comparing different states is often counter-productive, I can say that there are some common issues within the region. Certain policies or legislation—though perhaps not intended to be—discriminate against women. This includes legislation prohibiting women from passing their nationality on to their children and the right to get a divorce, just to name a few examples. There are also issues with legislation (and access to data) around violence against women—and domestic violence in particular—though more and more countries are tackling this problem.

That said, violence against women continues to remain a major deterrent to equality. Without the proper measures in place to both prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, the pandemic will continue. While women are now able to vote and run for office across the Gulf region, the overall rate of female participation is among the lowest globally. The reasons for this are many; but temporary special measures—such as a quota system for women in public office—that we do see in some other countries globally and in the region are not introduced in the GCC.

**Gulf Affairs: In recent years, what progress have GCC countries made vis-a-vis gender equality? Any milestones you find particularly promising?**

**Naciri:** There are several milestones across the GCC—including women's increased engagement in leadership, obtaining the right to vote, or reaching parity in education. The last milestone, which is a trend found across the Gulf region, is one of the key indicators of the Millennium Development Goals and is now also particularly important to the SDGs. It shows that more and more women are engaged in public life,

## IV. Interviews

---

and that women's voices are increasingly heard, recognized, and listened to on par with that of men. We are also seeing an increase in entrepreneurship—the youth bulge and the need to diversify the region's economy are leading to some very innovative female-driven ideas. Whenever young people take on a leadership role—and young women in particular use their voice—I am encouraged by what the future will hold. I do find it promising that we are seeing more of this, whether that's as a result of or reaction to the financial pressures in the region. Either way, it is a positive trend.

### **Gulf Affairs: How do you compare gender equality in GCC countries with the rest of the Arab world? Any unique trends or attributes?**

**Naciri:** The GCC is unique in that women are on par (or have exceeded) men in attaining post-secondary education credentials, including in the arts and sciences. The main concern in the Gulf region is the disconnect between educational achievement and larger empowerment—so while the region does well in terms of education, it does not have more women in leadership roles or more women in the formal workforce. It is this nexus—between education and empowerment—that we have to bridge. More and more countries themselves are investing in creating a diverse workforce, because the evidence shows that if the gender gap is reduced by 20 percent, it could boost GDP by \$415 billion in the Arab states alone. Capitalizing on the high level of education and ensuring that the policy environment is such that women have equal access to opportunities can certainly accelerate the Gulf's process of achieving the SDGs.

### **Gulf Affairs: What are the main obstacles to achieving greater gender equality in the GCC states?**

**Naciri:** To truly achieve gender equality, one needs several tracks. The first is a conducive legislative environment that ensures that men and women are equal under the law, that there is no impunity for violence against women, that the justice system is functioning, and that the policies put in place are implemented. This is something that takes time, but we are seeing positive trends and gradual change.

The second, and perhaps more difficult track, is to change cultural norms and attitudes. Gender inequalities are deeply rooted in traditions, though not necessarily substantiated by anything beyond this. There is always an initial fear and resistance to change—and yes, also a discourse around this change being an attack on a culture. I dare argue the opposite, in particular in this region where women have played such a strong role in shaping our societies.

That being said, to change these norms and to come to a common understanding that a more gender equal society benefits all, we need to have conversations at the community level. This will have to include both men and women (who are often custodians of tradition) around how this change will positively affect growth and prosperity for all. Changing these norms takes time and requires an ongoing dialogue that is community-driven—a bottom-up approach to match the top-down policy changes that GCC governments are enacting.

### **Gulf Affairs: Given the role cultural and religious norms play in shaping people's ideas about gender issues, are there key differences between how UN Women and Arab states would like to tackle the issue of gender equality? If so, how do you reconcile these differences without compromising your ability to work with Arab governments?**

**Naciri:** The facts speak for themselves: we know that societies will prosper when women are equal to men, we know a country's overall GDP will increase if women are equally represented in the workforce, and we know the cost on society decreases when violence against women declines. We also know that peace agreements are more likely to last when women are actively involved as leaders, and we know that governments in which women participate have social policies that better serve their nations.

These are the facts on which we base our programming, and they are the same across the world. In the Arab states, we work on this while also addressing the specifics of the region, including conflicts, socio-economic development, and the notion of culture (tradition and religion). As an example, for the first time in the region we conducted a study on masculinity—focusing on how women and men perceive their role and status in the family and society. It's incredibly important for us to address the root cause of inequalities, and to understand the pressures that men and women feel as a result of their sex. We have done the survey in four countries—Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Palestine—and are actually pioneering the same study in Kuwait, with a report scheduled for publication by the end of the year. What this study has done, and is doing, is that it is starting a conversation around masculine and feminine identities. We have found that many men, for example, would appreciate paternity leave. Having such data available, and being able to champion women and men who are working for a more gender equal society, is important for our work—and it shows that this change is indeed community-driven too.