

Female Labor Force Participation in the GCC

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In general, female labor force participation in the MENA region is among the lowest in the world. More specifically, the participation of women in the labor force in the GCC region is as low as 26.9%, which is about half of the world average of 51.7%. Although women make up 41% of the overall population of the region, they only account for 16% of the labor market. It is important to note though that female labor force participation has improved quite drastically with it doubling or even quadrupling in some countries over the past three decades. During the 2001 to 2010 period, around 1.5 million women joined the labor force in the GCC. This displays an 83% increase from the 1.8 million that were in the labor force in 2001 to the 3.3 million that were part of the labor force in 2010.

According to the World Bank, the participation of women in the labor force in 2013 in UAE and Qatar increased by more than 10%. Other GCC countries also displayed an increase in the percentage of women in the workforce, but at a lower extent than the increase witnessed in Qatar and UAE. Qatar has the highest rate of female labor force participation at 51%, closely followed by the UAE at 47%. These two countries make up the highest rates of female labor force participation in the GCC region for the year of 2013.

Women in this region are moving beyond the types of traditional confinements of home and family life that they have been limited to in the past. They are in fact making a lot of significant progress at work as well as in education and in socio-economic development. There are many examples of women who have assumed leadership positions in spheres such as the political, social, economic and management ones. Such examples include Lubna Olayan and Lama Al Sulaiman who have made their mark in the political and business arena. Even the median age of marriage has risen in the region with women marrying in their late 20s or early 30s so that they can focus on their education and their careers. Many women are even choosing to stay single which suggests that there has been a change in the GCC in the demographic patterns of marriage and reflects how economic and social changes are taking place all across the region. Even divorce rates have risen and women are becoming more socially and financially independent.

Women's participation in the public sphere is crucial due to both the social and economic benefits. Despite this, the majority of working women, about 80% of total employed women in the GCC, work in the private sector. Although women have made many strides recently, there remain many constraints in the form of laws and policies that discriminate against women because of traditional social norms and they attempt to limit women to the domestic role with men being the main wage earners. Saudi Arabia for example, the country with the largest economy in the region, continues to not allow women to travel, marry, divorce or work without the permission of a male guardian, which is usually either a husband, father, brother or son. Many socio-cultural customs limit women's opportunities wherein even in some other GCC

countries where women have the right to work, it is under the condition that they work in a proper environment. For many, the notion of a proper environment is described as one that does not require men to mix with women.

The labor force in the GCC constitutes 23.5 million, or 64%, of the region's total working age population with men making up 83% of this workforce. Women have a much higher literacy rate than their male counterparts but their participation remains as low as 29% for the region and even lower than this in places like Saudi Arabia which has a 20% labor force participation and Oman which has 29%. The participation of women in education is relatively high in the region but there are several factors that contribute to why this does not positively affect their labor force participation. Such factors include that there is a lack of motivation and poor job opportunities. Furthermore, women sometimes face discrimination at the work place. Once again though, the established gender roles of women as wives and mothers limit their roles and make the work-family balance difficult for them to achieve or even attempt in the first place. While women face many challenges and are limited to poorer job opportunities despite obtaining educational degrees, men in GCC countries can be hired in lucrative job positions in the public sphere, such as in government or the military, without even going to university. There is then definitely an imbalance in the opportunities and skill requirements of men versus women which proposes many challenges for women in the GCC.

Another aspect to consider is the presence of family-owned companies and how they contribute around 80% of the non-oil GDP of the region. The good thing about these companies is that they have begun acknowledging female family members' roles in the business. Mainly, their inclusion is due to the fact that families are smaller, the average marriage age is higher, the female workforce is increasingly more and more educated and social acceptance is growing. Despite the fact that all these factors encourage the inclusion and involvement of women in family businesses, there are still many challenges. The society's patriarchal views on gender roles limit women because they are expected to bear children and raise them. Women are also at a disadvantage when compared to their male siblings as they are then expected to develop the necessary skills while also balancing their domestic duties. They face a lot of pressure due to these domestic duties and their inadequate training in the business field. Furthermore, businesswomen in the GCC tend to not get a lot of support from their family members and there is a low level of transparency when it comes to making decisions. In a country like Saudi Arabia where women aren't even allowed to drive, the challenges they face can be especially difficult to overcome.

GCC countries have come up with many policies to improve the employment of women through for example, creating thousands of new jobs and ensuring that a good chunk of these jobs are for women. In places such as Saudi Arabia, the government has attempted to put forth a framework to create many more employment opportunities for women in education for example. They have also established female sections of the government as well as training programs. Saudi Arabia also revised their labor code so as to factor in maternity leave as well as nurseries, vacation time and so on.

Other than Saudi Arabia, other GCC countries have also taken vital steps to encourage women to participate in the labor force more. There is the example of the UAE who in 2008, launched a

five-year plan whose intention was to develop women's roles and find future female leaders. This includes putting in place training programs that help prepare UAE women for the business world. There is also the case of Qatar who with their 2030 National Vision have stressed on creating increased opportunities and vocational support for their female population. Furthermore, both Qatar and Kuwait have launched business forums that help business women contribute to the economic development of their countries. To combat discrimination of women in the workplace, all the GCC countries except for Oman have ratified the International Labor Organization's Convention No. 111 on job discrimination.

Due to the fact in many Arab countries, especially those in the GCC, gender discrimination is "codified in law, frequently in family law or civil codes," it is important to keep working to change these laws or replace them with laws that support rather than alienate women from the workforce (Moghadam & Roudi-Fahimi, 2005, p. 2). Maintaining the work-family balance is especially difficult for women as their career demands are increasing while they are still required to maintain their domestic duties. In a study done on Oman and Family-Friendly Policies, the researchers found that although there may be some cost to implementing such policies, the benefits far out way these costs. The researchers looked at it from the perspective of the private, public and governmental sectors and noted that "while the private-sector companies emphasize costs and benefits and social responsibility in their recruitment policies, public and government-sector employers do not exhibit any specifically focused area" (Belwal & Belwal, 2014, p. 112). As a result, there is a need for family friendly policies that aid women in their pursuit of a work-family balance. Policy recommendations include government intervention in the form of classifying some jobs as "Family Friendly." Furthermore, organizations need to be held accountable for providing a healthy working environment that doesn't mistreat women and that allots them basic amenities. Also, some education or awareness programs could be put in place to continue to change society's and their family's perceptions so as to ultimately lead to increased support of working women.

Other policies that allow women longer maternity leaves, flexible work hours as well as quality childcare will also go a long way in improving women's ability to balance work and family life and women will be more likely to participate in the labor force. Policies that have yielded positive results such as leading to a 10% increase in the labor force participation of women in OECD countries, for example, have taken into account the needs of women and allowed for more part-time work, child benefits, childcare and parental leave (Jaumotte, 2014; Hendy, 2015). Such work-family reconciliation policies will support women and will lead to increased female labor force participation without negatively affecting fertility rates (Jaumotte, 2014). It is of the utmost importance that labor policies aim at making employment more attractive through "accommodating work arrangements across the public and private sectors (working hours, internships, career counselling and benefits) that compatible with their multiple roles" (Assaad, 2008, p. 6). In the UAE for example, maternity leave is short and there isn't a wide array of publicly-subsidized childcare. Therefore, policies that make maternity leave longer and provide government-funded child care would decrease women's time cost of joining the labor force.

Encouraging women to take part in entrepreneurial roles will allow women more options for work in the labor market. This could allow women more outlets and could match with the conservative culture of the GCC as women could work from home. Entrepreneurial initiatives could be especially beneficial to GCC women as they can use their wealth and education to own

and manage their own businesses. In fact, a study on female entrepreneurs in the region found that in the UAE, 33% of enterprises that are owned by women generated over 100,000 USD a year while that percentage of firms in developed nations such as the US only adds up to 13% (“Women Entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa: Characteristics, Contributions, and Challenges”, 2007). Such women-owned firms help to create more employment opportunities too.

Many strides have been taken to both encourage the employment of women in the labor market and somewhat bridge the gap between men and women. Although the GCC region has witnessed a rise in labor force participation of women, a lot of work still needs to be done to get closer to the world average. The policies that some GCC countries have already put in place are a great first step but more needs to be done to reduce this issue all together. It is important to understand the work-family balance of women and put in place policies that are family friendly.

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