

# Political Empowerment: Gender Balance in Gulf Countries in the Era of Globalization

Afshan

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, A.P.M. College, Bareilly, India*

**Abstract:** This research work aims to investigate the position of Gulf women in politics within the framework of their economic and cultural integration and with special reference to their involvement in the decision-making process and focus on their under representation in ministerial positions. The absence of constitutional quotas and women appointments in decision-making body has been the main obstacles in women's active political roles. Currently in the Gulf States, women have no reservation in the National Parliaments. Political participation is a major part of women's empowerment and participation in the decision-making process. Moreover, women empowerment and leadership have become the cornerstones for many national and regional development initiatives. However, despite the recent gains in women's status experienced by some countries in the region, many contradictory trends relating to the position of women still remain. For example, there are numerous institutional and socio-cultural barriers which continue to thwart the integration and utilization of women in their country's socioeconomic development and political participation. Indeed, globalizing flows may actually strengthen some of these barriers and require new ways of addressing challenges to gender equality in a globalized context. Hence, the aim of this study is to present the political empowerment of women in the Gulf States by situating their experience within the framework and rhetoric of globalization in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the diverse institutional and cultural mechanisms that influence gender dynamics in the region.

**Keywords:** Women, globalization, empowerment, political participation, Gulf States.

## 1. Introduction

The 21st century has inherited the unfinished agenda of globalizing democracy in a more vibrant form. In many instances there is a feeling of unease about the ultimate meaning of representative democracy because of the recurring tendency of either excluding or marginalizing a large section of the citizens particularly women, from the systems of representation and decision-making. Such an exclusivist system also tends to get dominated by the rituals of psephocracy and manipulated by the unholy nexus of the three M's (Money, Men and Muscle). It is obvious that the new century has to bring back demos - the people - in the processes and institutions of democratic governance through feminization of the political space.

In case of the Gulf States, the system of government is monarchy, with the constitution governed by the state supported conservative interpretation of Islamic law, continue to relegate

women to a subordinate status. In the Gulf society, men usually experience better opportunities, more freedom, and higher social regard than women who share the same social characteristics such as class origins, race, nationality, and age and men also occupy a preponderance of the social positions that possess significant political, economic, legal or cultural power. Female leadership and participation in governance still face strong opposition from both men and women. The political economy of the Gulf States and particularly the centrality of its oil revenues have played a role in the marginalization of women, narrowing the space in which they can work and participate. However, despite the few existing authoritative works on women in the Gulf are quick to show that women, in fact, continue to struggle for basic political rights and are subject to inferior citizenship rights. Importantly, therefore, in bridging the gap between success that is claimed and the struggles that occurs is an investigation of the relative political power of women and the significance of their participation.

## 2. Women in Politics: A Global Issue

The startling absence of women in politics is a globally recognized phenomenon, which has, in recent years, led to increased national and international efforts to raise awareness and promote change in order to attain greater female participation within decision-making processes. Women across the world have started to question the predominance of men in political forums, why it is that men dominate and why it is that women do not, or cannot, participate in the same manner.

It is unfortunate that the political elite of our times has developed an attitude of benign neglect about the perpetual marginalization of the women in the system of decision-making. This is a problem of all democratic countries of the world today is it the oldest, the strongest, or larger. Let us take a look at the situation of women in these different settings. In the oldest democracy, that is UK, women got right to vote in 1918 and today they represent only 29 per cent. In the strongest democracy, the United States of America women got the right to vote in 1920 only after a long-sustained struggle they have reached only 19.4 per cent and so is the story of the largest democracy, India even after 70 years of independence women represents 11.8 per cent. [1]. So by the rules of the game we must wait for one century to get there as far as 50 per cent.

The Nordic countries demonstrate a successful policy of

inclusion and equality towards women in politics. All have a high representation of women in parliament, ranging from 45.3% to 38.4 as to countries such as Costa Rica, Argentina and even Rwanda, which has the highest representation of women in parliament at 61.3% [2]. Still, countries such as Qatar, Yemen, Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, to name but a few, have no female parliamentarians at all [3]. Even developed countries such as the USA, the UK, France and Ireland are afflicted with patriarchy and inequality, experiencing low numbers of women MPs in comparison to the actual number of women in the population.

**3. Women in Politics in Gulf region: The Exceptions**

An interesting phenomenon, particularly prevalent in West Asia is that whilst none of the Gulf monarchies are particularly 'woman friendly'. Although the journey along the road to the empowerment of women in the Gulf region has sometimes been slow, it is now surely under way, through forward steps of positive reforms, as more female voices are being heard. These voices reflect the motivation, determination and ambition of all those women who are striving to become active members in society and in building their country. Today, women in the Gulf region are taking on increasingly prominent roles, becoming decision-making, and participating in the public field as educators, professors, deans, businesswomen, bankers, medical professionals, scientific researchers and government ministers. With the exception of Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia all of the West Asian countries have known female cabinet ministers, chairperson and currently lead some of the significant Institute in the Gulf States. In the UAE, Sheikhha Fatima bint Mubarak Al Ketbi (wife of late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan), supreme chairperson of the Family Development Foundation, holds the title of Umm Al Emarat (Mother of the Nation) for her numerous achievements on behalf of women and for her leading and pioneering role in supporting Emirati women and their empowerment [4]. There are noticeable efforts to promote women in leadership and policymaking positions such as the appointment of a female parliament speaker in the UAE. On October 19, 2017, the prime minister of the UAE announced a cabinet reshuffle, with women comprising 30 percent of the Cabinet. Although there is no official quota provision in the UAE, there is a commitment from the country's leadership to increase women's representation in policy making positions. One initiative to promote the role of women in the workplace, at home and internationally, was the formation of the UAE

Gender Balance Council in 2015, which was responsible for the recently approved law on equal wages in the UAE.

On June 20, 2005, Kuwait's first female cabinet minister, Massouma Al-Mubarak, was sworn in, taking responsibility for the planning portfolio [5]. Six months earlier, a women was appointed minister of economy and planning in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Women have assumed ministerial posts in Bahrain and Oman as well. In 2003, Sultan Qaboos gave Sheikhha Aisha al-Siyabiah the status of minister in her role as president of the craft industries authority. Since then, two other women have been appointed as government ministers, with responsibility for tourism and higher education.6 In 2004, King Hamad al-Khalifa of Bahrain made Nada Hafadh, a doctor and (appointed) member of the upper house, the minister of health. And in January 2005, Fatima al-Balooshi was appointed minister of social affairs [7]. Meanwhile, in December 2004, Sheikh Khalifa, Zayed's son and successor, appointed SheikhhaLubna al-Qasimi as minister of economy and planning.8 An American-educated information technology specialist, she had previously run the "e-government" project for Dubai. Today, she is acting as prominent role in both government and parliament as Minister of State for Tolerance.9

Several women appointed as assistant undersecretaries in Saudi Arabia. In all the Gulf countries, there are women in the Bank's Board of Directors. For example, the general assembly of the Saudi-Dutch Bank elected Mrs. Lubna Al-Alyyan as a member of the Bank's Board of Directors on December 1, 2004. She is the chief executive officer of Olayan Corporation and a member of the Arab Business Council [10].

In Saudi Arabia, six women are advisors in Majlis al-Shura, a 180-member national consultative council appointed by the King. Saudi Arabia is the only country in the GCC states that has a quota for women representation in the Kingdom's Shura Council. The 20 percent quota was issued in a royal decree by King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz in 2013. This is a step towards women in public participation that could serve as the basis for appointing women as members of Majlis al-Shura and mere appointed in public positions. Meanwhile, two Gulf women appointed to the UN, Ms.Thoraya Ahmad Obaid from Saudi Arabia, is the UNFPA Executive Director, UN Under-Secretary General [11]. In 2006 Haya Rashid Al Khalifa, a pioneering lawyer and women's rights advocate from Bahrain has been elected UN General Assembly president, the third women in history and the first from the Middle East [12].

Other signs of progress for women leadership appeared with

Table 1  
Women's Political Representation in GCC Countries

	Lower or Single House				Upper House or Senate			
	Elections	Seats	Women	Women (%)	Elections	Seats	Women	Women (%)
UAE	2015	40	9	22.5	--	--	--	--
Kuwait	2016	65	2	3.1	--	--	--	--
Bahrain	2014	40	3	7.5	2014	40	9	22.5
Oman	2015	85	1	1.2	2015	85	14	16.5
Qatar	2013	35	0	0.0	--	--	--	--
Saudi Arabia	2016	151	30	19.9	--	--	--	--

Inter-parliamentary Union, Retrieved fromwww.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm

appointment in 2003 of Mariam Abdullah Al Jaber as the first district attorney in Qatar and the Gulf region, and in March 2010, Sheikha Maha Masour Salman Jassem Al Thani as the first female judge in court [13]. In 2006, Bahrain appointed the first female judge (Mona Jassem Al Kawari) at the Grand Civil Court [14]. In March 2008, UAE lawyer and Shariah specialist Kholoud Ahmad Al Daheri was appointed as primary judge at the Abu Dhabi Judiciary Department [15]. In February 2010, Saudi Arabian justice minister announced that the government is planning to allow female lawyers to begin appearing in court to represent women in matters related to divorce, child custody and other family issues [16]. Comprehensively, their expanding presence in politics is indicative of the changes taking place in the region. Through their achievements, they are exerting a positive influence on society and moving beyond the traditional confinement of home and family. Those powerful women in Gulf region are daughters and widows of royal families and other famous personalities and sometimes they are already the second female leader in line. Such women make ideal public icons, recognizable to the masses, which can potentially facilitate a country's maneuvers into political positions [17].

Those women, however, are an exception. The system of patriarchy still ultimately prevails in Arab society and, as a reflection, in politics too. Prominent figureheads may occasionally be women, but within the workings of the institutions and the ranks of the political parties, the numbers of women do not correspond to their presence in society and women do not enjoy the same status as those few who rose to prominence from familial ties.

The absence of women in politics in Gulf region is incredibly striking, especially at the National level. With the exception of UAE, all the states in the region have a representation of women in national parliaments of lower than 5% and in case of Saudi Arabia, as low as 2%.

#### **4. Why are Women Missing in Politics in the Gulf Region?**

There are many causal factors for this lack of women, some subtle and others more apparent. Deterrents to women's participation in Gulf politics include the deeply entrenched social and cultural norms, combined with conservative interpretations of Islamic law, continue to relegate women to a subordinate status inferior economic status, domestic violence, assault on character/reputation, low literacy rates and educational levels, unequal access to education, difficulty obtaining nomination preference given by rulers to nominate men [18].

Other factors include the political inheritance syndrome, absence of a political quota system, and the power of the vote to field the potential candidates. Women's representation decreases even as political participation is being recognized as an important means for women to address their concerns as women. It is also true that legal rights do not translate automatically into active citizenship rights within the Gulf countries. Some main obstacles in the way of women in politics

are as follows:

##### *A. Social Constraints*

Traditional patriarchal attitudes regard women as physically, intellectually and socially inferior to men. As a result, women in Gulf region face many social restrictions as well as a plethora of expectations and assumptions. Numerous social indicators highlight how disadvantaged girls are compared to boys and how undervalued their presence and contributions are in society. The disparity in education between girls and boys alone demonstrates how the upbringing of each child is different and how the expectation of how the child will advance in society varies depending on if it is a girl or a boy. The inequality starts at childhood and shapes the future of the society and a woman's place within it.

Due to these inequalities, men in society do not view women as valuable components of the decision-making structures. There are conventions that continue to dominate the Arab collective psyche today. Women in the collective Arab psyche are highly emotional creatures who are governed by changing moods and emotion and they are easily swayed.

Such misconceptions didn't come out of the blue. They were entrenched in the collective Arab through the prevailing rhetoric in contemporary Arab societies; the religious rhetoric that continues to issue fatwa's curtailing women's role in politics and questioning their capabilities; the educational rhetoric that stereotypes their role in society as homemakers who serve men in exchange for men's more advanced intellect and potential; the media message that objectifies women; the legislative rhetoric that fails to give women their rights; and the misleading rhetoric that unfortunately pits a large segment of women against women's rights activists and against female parliament candidates on the pretext of protecting women and family life.

##### *B. Education*

Aside from the conflict of multiple female roles, there are also educational factors working against women's political participation at higher levels. With the preference given to a son's education, many women do not pursue the education necessary to satisfactorily perform political functions. This is a huge constraint on women. Even if they are politically aware, a poor education will greatly hinder a woman's chance of being respected within local level politics and will certainly create a giant obstacle at the national level.

Since the 1990s, women in all six Gulf countries have made gains in access to education, literacy, university enrollment, and the veracity of subjects of study available to them. These new shifts are hardly tectonic. And most of the new, well-funded government initiatives --- to encourage women's education or bolster their rights --- are unlikely to foment significant change. While state-led initiatives have succeeded in boosting female educational attainment --- female adult literacy rates are higher than ever (84 per cent on average) and female university graduates now outnumber male university graduates in all six

Table 2  
 Literary Rates for Six Gulf Countries by sex in 2015

Country	Literacy Rate (all)	Male literacy	Female Literacy	Gender Difference
Oman	94.8%	96.9%	90.0%	6.9%
Qatar	97.8%	97.9%	97.3%	0.6%
Saudi Arabia	94.7%	97.0%	91.1%	5.9%
UAE	93.8%	93.1%	95.8%	-2.6%
Kuwait	96.2%	96.9%	95.0%	1.9%
Bahrain	95.7%	96.9%	93.5%	3.5%

Source: Table prepared based on Data published by UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) on behalf of UNESCO Institute for Statistics Database, 2015. Raw data. Quebec, Montreal.

Gulf States.

That trend has continued, for the most part, over the past five years. The secondary school completion rate for girls has grown by 73.1 per cent in the UAE, 66.7 per cent in Qatar, and 47.2 per cent in Oman. Moreover, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE now have the highest female-to-male university enrollment ratio worldwide, with women outnumbering men three to one [19].

From this UNESCO data, there is the impression that women are mostly educated, 97 percent of female youth is literate in the Gulf region. Women are also more likely to be enrolled in higher education in the region than young men (41 per cent compared to 22 per cent) [20].

Although women are generally encouraged to study traditionally female disciplines such as education and health care, they have started entering new fields, including engineering and science. For example, in Qatar, women were accepted for the first time in 2008 in the fields of architecture and electrical and chemical engineering. In Saudi Arabia, three educational institutions began to permit women to study law in 2007, although they are only allowed to act as legal consultants to other women and remain prohibited from serving as judges and lawyers in court [21].

*C. Economic empowerment grows despite persistent challenges*

Due to their abundant natural resources, most Gulf countries have experienced unprecedented growth and development of late, and are currently undergoing an economic and cultural metamorphosis. The effects of these changes on women and their rights cannot go unnoticed. Indeed, Gulf women remain economically marginalized barred from entering key occupational fields, and seriously underrepresented in legislative and decision-making bodies. But the picture is changing: a new generation of women with atrophying expertise and impressive degrees. Some of the (elite) women who have been part of the organizations have moved on to take up prominent positions of responsibility outside the organization.

Participation rates in the workforce are increasing across all the Arab Gulf countries at varying rates. States leaders have vigorously encouraged women to participate in the formal economy. Typically, among the Gulf countries, the vast majority of women are employed in the public sector. With comparatively high rates of participation in the workforce, in 2012 Kuwaiti women constituted 28 percent and 34 per cent in 2013. In Bahrain women constituted 20percent in 2004 and 23

per cent in 2014 and in the Qatar, 15 per cent in 2006 and 16 per cent in 2014. In Saudi Arabia women comprised 12 percent of the labor force in 2007 and 20.2 per cent in 2014 [22].

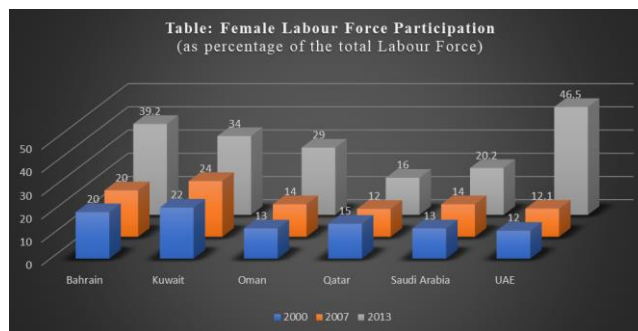


Fig. 1. Female labour force participation

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; See Employed population by nationality (2013)

Even though in Oman female participation in the workforce and female university enrollment are comparatively low, on the ground, female youth tends to express far greater aspirations for participation in public life than their counterparts across the border in the UAE. In Qatar, women comprise 15 percent of the total labor force [23]. The majority of Qatar's citizens oppose women taking an active role in public life [24]. As in the other Gulf states, however, women in Qatar exercise more decision-making power in the home as compared with their sisters in other Arab countries, a phenomenon shown little understanding in Western feminist epistemology. In the UAE, Emirati women were part of 21% of the labor force in 2008-09 [25]. Within the business sector, the UAE possesses the largest number of business women in the region where entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly popular. At the nine-year-old Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange, women constitute 43% of its investors while the city's Business women's association boasts 14,000 members [26]. At the forefront of Emirati women in business is Sheikha Lubna bint Khalid bin Sultan al Qasimi, appointed Minister for Economy and Planning in November 2004 and subsequently promoted to her current post as Minister of State for Tolerance. Sheikha Lubna holds the distinction of being the first woman to hold a ministerial post in the country. Her efforts have led her to be rated within the Forbes Magazine's 100 Most Powerful Women [27].

In Saudi Arabia, women might be considered the most deprived compared to other women in the Gulf countries. Saudi Arabia implements the Sharia's laws on issue regarding women

and family. In keeping with the strict segregation of Saudi society, females are employed to run women's schools as teachers and as administrators. There are more than 20,000 women employed by the government in jobs where they work in different careers as teachers, physical therapists, social workers, administrators and doctors. This segregation gives women a professional advantage because there is no competition with men for such jobs [28].

A working woman lives in two separate worlds in Saudi Arabia. As an active career woman, she contributes to society, but as a protected female, she is veiled in public and cannot have her country for any reason without a relative as a guardian, a 'Mahram'. This especially limits, Saudi women who are not allowed to attend conferences or seminars or even to represent their government abroad even on an individual basis. With such severe restrictions facing employed women, few of them stay in their jobs --- especially married women with children. In 1983, 30% (25,000) of Saudi Arabia's women teachers resigned, citing their husband's objections, the pressure of household responsibilities, poor transportation and the scarcity of nursery schools and day-care services as reasons [29]. However, there is still much debate in Saudi society on old and modern values concerning women and their role in development.

Although, several longstanding cultural mores regarding proper professions for women remain cemented into the law. In virtually every country in the region, labor laws prohibit women from undertaking dangerous or arduous work, or work which could be deemed detrimental to their health or morals. Meanwhile, women do not generally receive equal pay for equal work in private-sector jobs, and cases of discrimination in this sector abound, such as in the distribution of various perks and benefits. Discrimination in promotion is still reported in the public sector. Women are encouraged to go into jobs deemed 'feminine', such as teaching and labor laws prohibits women from working in what is seen as dangerous jobs and overnight shifts, except in the medical field. Education and most workplaces generally remain segregated by sex. However, segregation is also a means by which women are encouraged to take part in public life. In other words, without segregation at universities and in the public sector a much smaller percentage of women would be studying and entering the workforce.

#### *D. Women's political rights gain amid low regional standards*

Throughout the Gulf, both male and female citizens lack the power to change their government democratically and have only limited rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech. According to Freedom in the World, the global assessment of political rights and civil liberties issued annually by Freedom House, none of the Gulf countries earn the rating of "free," and none qualify as electoral democracies [30]. Despite the overall lack of freedom, however, women have made notable gains over the last five years in their ability to vote and run for elected office, hold high-level government positions, and lobby the government for expanded rights.

According to the UNDP's assessment, Kuwait has made greater progress than most of the Gulf countries towards improving the status of women [31]. Significantly, on 16 May 2005, the Kuwaiti parliament approved a law giving Kuwaiti women full political rights including electoral rights. Kuwait had previously received international attention regarding female suffrage in 2003, when the cabinet approved draft legislation granting women full rights to vote and to run as candidates in elections [32]. The legislation was blocked, however, given the predominance of Islamists and social conservatives in the legislature. Similarly, the parliament had blocked a decree issued in 1999 by Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabahis granting women the right to vote and run for office in the 2003 parliamentary elections [33]. Thus, although Kuwaiti women have made greater advances they do have greater challenges in the form of this Islamist influence.

Gains in the government sector remain steady. On 12 June 2005, for the first time in Kuwait's history, a woman was appointed minister of planning and administrative development and later appointed minister of health. A second woman was appointed minister of education and higher studies. That year, two further women were appointed to the sixteen-member municipal council. In 2007, a woman was again appointed minister of education and higher studies and in 2008 a woman was appointed minister for housing and administrative planning. A woman currently serves as undersecretary of education and several ambassadors are women.

Until 2002, Bahraini women had no political rights. They could neither vote nor stand in elections. The constitution was amended in 2002 so that women were allowed to run in the 2002 municipal and parliamentary elections, although no-one won a seat [34]. One female candidate won an uncontested parliamentary seat, becoming the first elected Bahraini female deputy in parliamentary elections held on 25 November 2006. Bahrain appointed its first female judge on 6 June 2006 [35]. Furthermore, in June 2006, when Bahrain was elected head of the United Nations General Assembly, a woman was appointed as the assembly's president, becoming the first Middle Eastern woman and the third woman in history to take the post. However, political gains in Kuwait and Bahrain have also come about with grassroots pressure.

In 2009, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani issued a decree, appointing a woman as a judge in the constitutional court [36]. Further, he also appointed women to the positions of minister of education, public prosecutor, director of the University of Qatar and deputy director and dean of the faculty of Islamic Law and Islamic Studies. These appointments did not result from social pressure, but rather for the will of the Qatari leadership --- and the special committee of the First Lady, Sheikha Moza Al Misned --- to increase the number of women in leadership roles [37].

Political gains in the UAE also have been largely led by the rulers and, in particular, the wives of the rulers --- Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, wife of the late Sheikh Zayed, and Sheikh

Mouza bint Nasser Al-Misnad, wife of Sheikh Hamad. Although women had long held positions in the local government and in the national parliament, UAE had been one of the slowest to allow women into key federal government positions. On 1 November 2004, the United Arab Emirates appointed a woman as minister of economy and trade. A woman was then elected to the Federal National Council, and eight others were appointed in 2007, representing 22.5 percent of the parliament and instantly sweeping the UAE up to a ranking of having one of the highest representations of female parliamentarians in the World [38]. In 1998, Qatar pioneered women's political rights in the Gulf, permitting women to vote in municipal elections. They were also permitted to stand as candidates; several runs, but none were elected. The first female elected official won in the second municipal elections held in April 2003, and then a woman was appointed minister of education [39]. In the same year, Qatari voters, including women, approved a new constitution and referendum gives women the rights to vote and stand for parliamentary election. Empowering women and providing them with equal access to opportunities allowed them to emerge as social and economic actors, in influencing and sharing in decision-making policies. Qatari's women have proved their ability to succeed in a multitude of educational, medical, cultural and other fields in which they have had the opportunity to engage and participate. Previously, the Sheikh Hamad's sister had held the highest position given to a women --- deputy chair of the Higher Committee for Family Affairs, but today Qatari's women are making small but notable gains in their struggle to achieve equality with men [40]. In 2007 a woman won a seat on the Central Municipal Council. However, cultural and social norms continue to prevent women from participating in certain professions and taking part in society in representative numbers [41].

Oman had been one of the forerunners in supporting women to public office in the Gulf region. In 1997, Oman announced that women could stand for election in the lower chamber of the country's consultative council, and two women were in fact elected [42]. In 2003, the winds of change arrived in Oman as the nation gained universal suffrage and the Sultan Qaboos opened the election process to all Omani citizens above the age of 21, the right to vote and the parliamentary elections for the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) in October 2003 were the first time in which Omani women were free to participate without restrictions; none won, while the two female incumbents were both re-elected, keeping the female representation the same [43]. In 2007, no women further elected. Sultan Qaboos appointed to his seventy-member Majlis ad-Dawla fourteen women in November 2007 [44]. However, the overall level of political and civic participation remains low. The testimony of men and women in Omani courts is now equal in most situations because of a new law on evidence. If properly implemented, this law would set an important precedent in the region. Despite the advancements, women continue to face

legal and social obstacles, and are required to obtain the written consent of a male relative before under-going any kind of surgery.

Similar trends in women's participation, "political rights and challenges can be seen in Saudi Arabia. The country performs well below its neighbors in all categories, with women and their rights improved slightly, with women now allowed to study law, obtain their own identification cards, check into hotels alone and register business without first proving that they hired a male manager. On September 2011, King Abdullah announced that women would be allowed to become members in the Shura Council for the next session and to nominate candidates and run as a candidate for public office in the next elections for the municipal council making a historic landmark in the political empowerment of women in the countries [45].

Saudi women have also been enjoying greater social freedom than ever before. A series of momentous change have given a huge boost to Saudi women's ability to participate fully in public life. In April 2018, Saudi Arabia for the first time allowed a mixed-gendered concert to take place. Undoubtedly, 2018 has been a landmark year for Saudi Arabia – but even more so for women in the Kingdom, who have had a momentous 12 months enjoying newly acquired freedoms and being at the forefront of change under reforms led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. From getting behind the steering wheel, to being the driving force in prominent international, governmental and business roles, women are welcome landmark social change. Saudi women can lead. This is the key to the realization of the Saudi Vision 2030 and "National Transformation Program."

### **5. The impact of globalization on the status of women in gulf states**

The Gulf States have developed mixed attitudes about globalization. For many, the material benefits that result from their advantageous economic integration into the world market outweigh the threats posed by cultural and political transformations. However, when it comes to the status of women, Gulf states have been unwilling to accept global discourses on rights, as well as women's personal status and autonomy in almost all Gulf states. While governments in the Gulf States may choose to adopt a partial embracing of globalization, it is hard to assume that their efforts are likely to be embraced by all members of society given the elusive character of global influences.

Meanwhile, global processes have improved the status of women in the Gulf states. The globalization of the economies of the Gulf has also increased access to markets and motivated many women to start their own business and expand their entrepreneurial activities. The expansion of women's private business has allowed many women to form national and regional business associations to expand their access to business networks and markets and promote and advocate for furthering their business interests. However, it may be too soon

to assume that the general impact of globalization on women's lives is only positive as other global dynamics such as competitive market forces, political clients, and social polarization bring about negative consequences to societies in general and women's lives in particular.

In some respect, the polarizing effect of globalization on women is taken to create contradictions and conflicts of interest among women of different social classes. This is partially evident in the Gulf States as, despite the numerous initiatives to promote women's leadership, internship activities, education and public participation, the Gulf region has yet to witness organized social movements that advocate for gender equality and more general social changes. In almost all countries of the region, legal barriers imposed on the formation of civil society organizations, drastically limit the potential for organizing activities that would promote large-scale social transformations.

The Arab Human Development Report 2016 argued that the full empowerment of Arab Women is a crucial facet of the future development of the region and its participation in global society [46]. The empowerment of women is defined as granting women equal access to participate in politics, society and the economy. Despite the popularity of women's empowerment in development discourse and regional initiatives, and the large gains in women's status experienced by some countries in the region, institutional and socio-cultural barriers to thwart women's full integration and utilization in their country's social and economic development.

Meanwhile, Gulf countries have adopted many positive steps to promote gender equality and the advancement of women in the labor market. At the international level, all Gulf countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (although with some reservations on marriage, divorce and family relations which are based on Shariah compliance) [47]. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also ratified the International Labor Organization Convention (ILO) No. 100 on equal remuneration for men and women, which established the principle and practice of equal pay for work of equal value. Five of the Gulf countries (the exception is Oman) have also ratified the ILO Convention No. 111 on job discrimination [48].

Although there is still a significant gender gap in all ages, women's participation in the labor market has increased considerably in all Gulf countries, doubling and even quadrupling in some countries over the past 20 or 30 years. According to the United Nations Development report of 2013, women's participation in the labor force reached 39.2 per cent in Bahrain, 43.6 per cent in Kuwait, 29 percent in Oman, 50.1 per cent in Qatar, 20.2 per cent in Saudi Arabia, and 46.5percent in UAE. Women are predominantly employed in the public and the service sectors [49].

Even these oil-rich countries cannot sustain long-term growth and prosperity if half the population remains marginalized and excluded from the workforce. The Gulf

countries should begin to invest in and reform public and private sector institutions in favor of female-friendly politics. This can begin at the ground-level, by encouraging school curriculum reform; challenging to hire women in positions with more responsibility; or creating conditions that allow women greater opportunities for homework and entrepreneurship.

However, Gulf women have achieved gains, but more needs to be done. Today, in order to face the new challenges of globalization and to be able to compete in a modern global economy, more measures should be adopted and implemented so as to promote the advancement of women in the region. They should also be given the opportunity to express their full potential and be an integral part of the socioeconomic society. The need to strengthen the legal protections for women and enforce the implementation of laws preserving their rights. Thus, the success of Gulf society depends on how it invests in all its members, women as much as men, because women are a most valuable potential resource in the development and investing in women will yield great rewards, both today and in the future.

## 6. Conclusion

The prospects for women's political emancipation in the GCC countries remain slim. Social customs make it particularly different for women to be elected. Thus, quotas and appointments seem the best way, provisionally, to overcome social impediments to enhance women's active political roles. The government should treat women as full persons before the law by recognizing their equality in court settings. Media restrictions should be loosened so that images of women in all walkways of life may be clearer, with the goal of growing public awareness of women as citizens, as people, and as people with donations for the improvement of social club. The government should appoint a larger number of qualified women to high-profile positions so that the public will get accustomed to the thought of women in leadership roles. Such initiatives are encouraging, although much more needs to be done to allow women to fully contribute to their societies. Political empowerment of women should go hand-in-hand with economic empowerment of women. Women will need to play a bigger role in the current economic reforms to ensure more laws and opportunities are created to support gender equality.

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