



كلية محمد بن راشد للإدارة الحكومية  
MOHAMMED BIN RASHID SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

# Policy Note 4

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## **From the Classroom to the Boardroom: Enhancing Women's Participation in the GCC Workforce**

### *Introduction:*

Women dominate higher education in more than half of the Middle East and Gulf countries. For example, in Kuwait, 64% of university students are women, and in Saudi Arabia, the percentage is 52.<sup>1</sup> In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Emirati women constitute 77% of total university students, the highest percentage of women in higher education in the world.<sup>2</sup> A recent estimate states that there are 24% more Emirati women than men in UAE institutions of higher education, with nearly eight out of ten UAE women pursuing higher education.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these advancements in education, women's labour participation rates in the MENA region remain low, at an average of twenty percent compared to forty percent globally.<sup>4</sup> This raises the question, why are women's increased university attendance not translating into greater parity in the workplace? Dr. Maier states that attitudinal, institutional and socio-cultural factors inform women's empowerment within the workforce. This policy note identifies barriers to women's participation in the workplace in the region and proposes recommendations to overcome these challenges.

### *Background:*

In her seminar, Dr. Maier asks how we can capitalize on the achievements of the UAE government, which have brought Emirati women into higher education at an unprecedented rate. Women's advancements in education in the UAE, and the Gulf more broadly, are significant but do not reflect a growing participation in the workforce. While the decision to work is guided by individual preferences, high rates of women's unemployment, in relation to men's unemployment, indicate that there are constraints that prevent women from working. A study by National Commercial Bank (2012)<sup>5</sup> cites the 2010 unemployment rate for Saudi women, where 28.4% of Saudi women were unemployed compared to 6.9% of Saudi men. Among Qatari women, the 2011 unemployment rate was 8%, compared to 1.7% for Qatari men. The report also illustrates that among UAE nationals, women's unemployment was as high as 28.1% compared to 7.8% for men.<sup>6</sup> Nora Al Bedur, Director of Employment and Skill Development Centre at TANMIA (the UAE's National HR Development and Employment Authority) reports that 80% of Emirati jobseekers registered with TANMIA are women, suggesting that barriers to employment are gendered.<sup>7</sup>

1. C. Davies, "Mideast women beat men in education, lose out at work," June 6, 2012, CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/06/01/world/meast/middle-east-women-education/>
2. UNICEF, 2010 in H.M. Al-Othman, "Attitudes toward women participation in public life," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 12, no.3 (2011).
3. "Women in the UAE," last modified April 2013, Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in Washington DC, <http://www.uae-embassy.org/uae/women-in-the-uae>.
4. The World Bank, *Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: 2013).
5. Report cited in "GCC hit by high youth unemployment: But general joblessness rates are among lowest in the world," last modified 26 July 2012, Emirates 24/7, <http://www.emirates247.com/business/gcc-hit-by-high-youth-unemployment-2012-07-26-1.468856>.
6. Ibid.
7. <http://www.tanmia.ae/English/Pages/default.aspx>

### *Barriers to women's participation in the workforce:*

Gender equality is key to increasing women's participation and success in the workforce. Employers in the GCC, and globally, discriminate against women employees, perceiving them as more costly and less productive than men.<sup>8</sup> Despite laws mandating equal pay regardless of gender, women frequently cite dissimilarities in their pay rate on the

“The institutional barriers that some women face, especially in male dominated sectors, are daunting. It can be very difficult to balance work and life responsibilities. Sometimes work environments are not supportive.”

*Dr. Sylvia Maier*

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basis on gender. In a study conducted by TANMIA (2006)<sup>9</sup>, 37% of women participants reported receiving a lower pay rate because of their gender. Baud and Mahgoub (2001)<sup>10</sup> found that 21% of Emirati women had been overlooked for a work promotion due to gender discrimination. Differences in pay can also be attributed to the greater opportunities for career development available to local males. Presently, it is likely that there is a deficit in opportunities for career development and advancement for

women. Internships and scholarships can provide women with the skills and experience they need to be successful in the workplace, while changing employers' attitudes toward women workers. More broadly, policies should address gender equality in the workforce, and discrepancies in pay rate and advancement based on gender.

Many cite a disconnect between the subject matter taught to women in schools and the demands of the workplace, particularly in the private sector. Women tend to study certain subjects over others, partly reflecting traditional gender ideals, while also reflecting their desire to work in the public sector in fields traditionally available to women, such as teaching and administration. Greater diversity of education programs in local universities, and an increased awareness of other career prospects will encourage women to pursue careers in fields typically dominated by men, such as science, technology, and engineering.<sup>11</sup> Policies may also address employer perceptions of women workers in fields typically dominated by men.

Nationalization policies in the GCC have led to marginal increases in women's participation rates in the private sector.<sup>12</sup> Metcalfe (2008)<sup>13</sup> argues that recruitment and human resource practices of private sector organizations severely limit women's career opportunities. Emirati women experience difficulty in advancing beyond entry-level positions, and express feeling that they have been merely hired to fulfill a quota.<sup>14</sup> More systemic labour market reforms are necessary “in order to capitalize on the valuable human resource asset that women represent”.<sup>15</sup>

Policies that empower working mothers are necessary to maintain mothers in the workforce. In Saudi Arabia, women are entitled to four weeks of leave prior to the expected delivery date, followed by six weeks of leave at half pay, or at full pay if they have been under contract for more than three years.<sup>16</sup> In Bahrain, women in the public and private sectors receive 60 days of fully paid maternity leave; women in Qatar and Oman receive 50 days. Kuwait comes closer to meeting international standards, and provides women with 70 days of paid maternity leave, with the possibility of four subsequent months of unpaid leave.

“It makes good economic sense for women to participate in the formal economic sector.”

*Dr. Sylvia Maier*

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8. The World Bank, *Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: 2013).

9. Cited in J. Al-Ali, “Emiratization: Drawing UAE nationals into their surging economy,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 28, no.9/10 (2008).

10. Ibid.

11. N. G. Aswad et al., “Creating a Knowledge-based Economy in the United Arab Emirates: Realising the Unfulfilled Potential of Women in the Science, Technology and Engineering Fields,” *European Journal of Engineering Education* 36, no.6 (2011).

12. E. Rutledge et al., “Women, Labour Market Nationalization Policies and Human Resource Development in the Arab Gulf States,” *Human Resource Development International* 14, no.2 (2011).

13. B. D. Metcalfe, “Women, Management and Globalization in the Middle East,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 83, no.1 (2008).

14. E. Rutledge et al.

15. E. Rutledge et al., p.183.

16. “Mother needs a break; Mercer offers insight on maternity leave in the KSA,” last modified 18 March 2013, Mercer, <http://me.mercer.com/press-releases/insight-on-maternity-leave-in-saudi-arabia>

In the UAE, mothers in the public sector receive 60 days and mothers in the private sector receive 45 days of paid maternity leave after a year of continuous employment. While mothers can extend their leave an additional 100 unpaid days with a medical certificate, this allowance does not meet the recommendation set forth by the International Labour Organization (ILO), which recommends that employers provide 14 weeks (the equivalent of 98 days) of maternity leave and cash benefits of no less than two-thirds of the previous wage.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the three days of paid leave received by fathers in the UAE public sector is insufficient to relieve parental stresses on new mothers and help facilitate their return to work. Flexibility at work, access to reliable childcare, and parental leave that meets international standards help alleviate the dual responsibility of work and family experienced by working mothers.

Prevailing cultural and social norms largely determine socially acceptable working roles for women. Cultural stigmas act as barriers to women's participation in certain industries within the private sector. Women may be discouraged from adopting mixed-gender occupations outside of professions traditionally dominated by women such as teaching and nursing.<sup>18</sup> Some GCC national women may fear that working in a mixed-gender work environment will impact their reputation. While in the public sector there may be separate working areas for women and men, this can be more challenging to accommodate within the private sector. Women may prefer to work within the public sector where "social conventions are better acknowledged and accommodated".<sup>19</sup> Restrictions on mobility and choice also continue to limit women's job prospects. All GCC countries, to varying degrees, restrict women from working at night, thereby reducing their employment opportunities.

While entrepreneurship can address some of the challenges relative to the private sector, women entrepreneurs face significant barriers relative to men. Barriers specific to Emirati women include a lack of support at the startup of a venture, society and traditions, and personal and family reasons.<sup>20</sup> In the UAE, training programs such as those provided by the Abu Dhabi Businesswomen's Group (ADBW) and Dubai Business Women's Council (DBWC) can help women entrepreneurs overcome these obstacles.

### **Conclusion:**

Increasing GCC national women's employment opportunities requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses attitudinal, institutional and socio-cultural barriers. Dr. Maier stresses the importance of government buy-in through the implementation of a national action plan that addresses barriers to women's employment while reflecting local contexts and needs. Furthermore, greater access to national statistical data is required for more rigorous program evaluation and to facilitate the implementation of evidence-based programs and initiatives.

### **Recommendations and Next Steps:**

- Challenge norms that constrain women's participation in the labour force.
- More accommodating and flexible work environments for working mothers. Flexible hours, access to reliable childcare, and parental leave that meets international standards.
- Provide women with training and internship opportunities to increase their competitiveness in the labour market.
- Increase women's economic opportunities by removing constraints to participation in the workforce and nurturing entrepreneurship.
- Create a national action plan that addresses barriers to women's employment.
- Increase access to national statistical data to facilitate rigorous program evaluation and evidence-based policymaking.



**"Both men and women must commit to gender equality, inclusivity and equity. I think that lies at the foundation of everything."**

*Dr. Sylvia Maier*



17. International Labour Organization, C183 - Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183)

18. Frances Hasso, *Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010).

19. M. Gallant & J. S. Pounder, "The Employment of Female Nationals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE): An Analysis of Opportunities and Barriers," *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues* 1, no.1 (2008): 30.

20. H. Itani et al. "United Arab Emirates Female Entrepreneurs: Motivations and Frustrations," *Equality Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 30, no.5 (2011).

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**The Gender and Public Policy Program** at MBRSG supports theoretically and methodologically rigorous research that conceptualizes, problematizes, and analyzes gender gaps while, at the same time, linking the research to agendas and instruments for informed policy action.

**The Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government** (MBRSG) is a research and teaching institution focusing on public policy in the Arab world. Established in 2005 under the patronage of HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, MBRSG aims to promote good governance through enhancing the region's capacity for effective public policy.

## Suggested Further Reading

Alsharekh, Alanoud. *Challenging Limitations: The Redefinition of Roles for Women in the GCC*. London: Saffron Books, 2005.

Curley, Nina. "What women want at work in Qatar: Conclusions from W4Women Doha." *Wamda*. June 12, 2013. <http://www.wamda.com/2013/06/what-women-want-at-work-in-qatar-conclusions-from-w4women-doha>.

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Stone, Pamela. *Opting Out?: Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.



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