



The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



Women's Labor Force Participation Across the GCC

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About the Author

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Executive Summary

The current challenge for the oil and gas exporting states of the Gulf Cooperation Council rests in diversification of their economies, and perhaps more importantly, in the activation of a more productive and efficient workforce. That workforce is increasingly divided among nationals dominating the public sector and non-nationals populating the private sector. Women are underrepresented in the labor force, in the public and private sectors, across the GCC. Where there is greater integration of both national and non-national women in the labor force, there is also generally more opportunity for women's political participation. Women's employment in the GCC is emblematic of the intensity and pace of economic development. There has been so much change, over such a short period of time, that the simultaneous projects of capturing resource wealth, increasing social welfare, and building infrastructure have put in motion new challenges for states to manage. More diverse societies and workforces have created barriers to and opportunities for the economic empowerment and inclusion of women.

This paper examines women's integration in the labor force in the Gulf Arab states, paying special attention to differences in public and private sector employment, and national and migrant female labor participation. There are a number of barriers to women's full economic and political inclusion in Gulf societies. This paper probes how two critical factors might interfere with Gulf states' policy objectives of increasing national and female labor participants. These are degrees of oil resource dependency (or alternatively stated, success in economic diversification) and the presence and overreliance on foreign workers in the labor market. Other social factors, including family life and cultural norms, also explain women's preferences for public sector employment, or to stay home.

Introduction

There is a paradox in women's achievement across the Gulf states. By most international standards, female citizens of the six Gulf Cooperation Council states have good access to education systems, affordable and professional health care, and social services. Women are graduating from university in higher numbers than their male peers, maternal health risks are low, child care and family support services are affordable and plentiful. However, women in the Gulf, particularly citizens, are marginalized, and in some sectors nearly invisible, in the labor force. They are most absent from economic life in private sector labor markets. However, in GCC states where there are more national women in the workforce, there also tend to be more expatriate or non-national women workers. The economies in the Gulf that employ more women, namely Kuwait and Bahrain, also tend to be relatively more politically liberalized, in the sense that they have more active legislative and representative institutions. In these places where women are slightly more visible (though still very much a minority of the workforce), there also tends to be more room for women's political participation.

There is also some variation within the GCC states in the relationship between natural resource dependence and women's labor force participation. In some Gulf states, like Bahrain and Kuwait, that are highly dependent on oil revenue as a source of government outlays, women tend to be more present within the workforce; they are also able to access and engage in legislative institutions. In other states, where resource wealth has been more abundant, as measured in per capita income, like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, there are mixed results in women's labor force participation. Qatari women are few in the formal labor force, while Emirati women are participating marginally more. It seems that resource wealth alone is not a deterrent to women's employment. Heavily resource-dependent states with declining resource wealth per capita (or those states that depend on oil exports to run their governments but have less oil to sell) might create economic incentives for women to work. These observations serve as evidence of the complexities of Gulf societies and their diversity in experience in economic development and economic inclusion. This paper explores explanations for the paradox of women's economic participation in the Gulf Arab states, while also pointing to available data on the visibility of women workers.

The first section introduces social and cultural barriers to women's mobility and engagement in the public sphere. Second, an overview of the structure of labor markets in the GCC, including data on national and non-national employment, demonstrates the extent of the challenge of women's equal participation in the workforce. The paper presents a series of charts detailing the demographic balance of migrant labor in the Gulf, along with data on women's employment. There are certainly holes in the available data on migrant women's labor participation, especially delineated by sector, age, national origin, and level of education attainment. The paper draws no hard conclusions on causality, but rather explores correlations

(and inconsistencies) within existing metrics.¹ Third, the paper evaluates the argument that resource wealth, or a so-called “oil curse,” has a detrimental effect on women’s economic and political empowerment. The paper suggests alternative, and complementary, explanations to oil, or resource, wealth as the culprit, indicating why other obstacles to women’s political and economic inclusion in Gulf societies may persist. The paper suggests further variables to investigate in explaining both the socioeconomic and political positionality of women within the Gulf, including an examination of the role of migrants and ideational flows in the construction of global cities. The paper’s aims are exploratory rather than conclusive, with the goal of building evidence for policy-based recommendations for social and economic inclusion of women (both national and migrant) in forthcoming diversification and economic development plans of Gulf states.

Women and Migration in Gulf State-Society Relations

The specific patterns of economic development and state building within the Gulf Arab states have reinforced some traditions of women’s participation in social and economic life, while at the same time creating new dynamics that have undermined and delegitimized women’s presence as workers and contributors in the public sphere. The process of state building has included specific narratives about family life and women’s place in Gulf society, often obscuring a historical record of periods of more active and visible roles for women.² Gwen Okruhlik has written about the construction of national identity, specifically in the Saudi case, in which narratives of the family as loyal to monarchy are instilled as both cultural norms and ways of establishing order, from the individual level to the societal level. This order depends on the relative weakness of the position of women; the stability of the state depends on the compliance (or absence) of women.³ Okruhlik theorizes this maintenance of order as the “official civic mythology”:

Loyalty to the family structure is linked with loyalty to the state under the al-Saud; the private family reinforces the public family. The second component, expected norms of social behavior, is defined fairly rigidly, and women bear the brunt of social expectations...This fuses social norms and religious interpretation, and the state identifies itself in turn with this fusion.⁴

In earlier work, scholars such as Eleanor Doumato have underlined how women’s social position reaffirms the legitimacy of the state, but it also structures debate around appropriate reforms.⁵ The value system that prioritizes women’s protection and separation from both men

¹ For example, there are World Bank metrics on women’s political inclusion that rank Saudi Arabia as having higher levels of female parliamentary representation than Bahrain, though in practice Bahrain offers more political rights for women than Saudi Arabia. The use of the term “parliament” here is flexible as Shura councils and federal councils are not equal to those elected bodies with legislative and budgetary authority; at the least the blanket term may skew analysis of women’s presence in the public sphere. For data on women’s representation in parliaments, see [“Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments,”](#) *The World Bank*, accessed November 3, 2016.

² See for example, Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, ed., *Gulf Women* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

³ Gwenn Okruhlik, “The Irony of Islah (Reform),” *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 2005): 153-70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁵ Eleanor A. Doumato, “Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity in Saudi Arabia,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (1992): 31-47.

and immorality gives the state the authority to decide how best to guard women, and how best to create safe spaces where they can work, learn, and socialize. The paternalistic state can reinforce its legitimacy by controlling female mobility. As Doumato explains:

Gender ideology works as an instrument of legitimation because it appeals directly to the myths of nationhood as patriarchal tribal family...Women's modesty, family values, and women's dependency on men represent support for the integrity of the patriarchal family. In a time of rapid change, the monarchy must provide stability, and support for the patriarchal family and 'traditional values' is support for stability.⁶

In case countries where women's mobility is less restricted (where there are not restrictions on driving and gender separation within the workplace, for example), there remain "cultural and social" barriers for national women to engage in politics and work.

As Emilie Rutledge, Fatima al Shamsi, Yahia Bassioni, and Hend al Sheikh have detailed in their work on women and nationalization policies in the Gulf Arab states, the level of educational attainment is not the key obstacle to women's economic participation. Women's participation in the labor force is more limited by social and cultural barriers, and even geographic mobility, as the family (and proximity to home) centers spatially in the protected sphere of women's lives, even in states where women's legal limitations to enter the workforce are less restrictive.⁷ They write of their interview data on women's incorporation into public and private sector employment and the mismatch of policy efforts to increase women's labor participation among nationals:

In human capital terms, therefore, if women are making more of the educational services provided by the state and are thus better placed to engage with the knowledge economy, it would logically follow that policymakers focus more explicitly on the barriers this cohort face and be more gender-aware in future labour market regulation and policy formulation...there were significant economic costs arising from not incorporating more educated women into the labour force.⁸

Measures of gender inequality across the Gulf Arab states reveal this paradox between achievements in education and health, limited political participation opportunity (and problematic evaluation of that participation and electoral representation), and challenges to employment. How is it that women have been able to access educational institutions and excel, and achieve some measure of inclusion in representative institutions (if not voice), yet employment, particularly in the private sector, seems to be limited?

The demographic composition of Gulf societies has certainly shifted over the past several decades, and that imbalance, in both gender terms and among citizens and foreigners has impacted labor markets and social expectations of what a "worker" is. For example, Michael Ewers and Ryan Dicce show how the rise of global cities within the Gulf is changing the nature of global labor migration, but also affecting the destination labor markets (and the societies that encompass them). They argue:

⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁷ Emilie Rutledge, Fatima al Shamsi, Yahia Bassioni, and Hend al Sheikh, "Women, Labour Market Nationalization Policies and Human Resource Development in the Arab Gulf States," *Human Resource Development International* 14, no. 2 (April 2011): 183-98.

⁸ Ibid., 192.

The rise of new centres of industry, finance, and technology in East Asia, as well as the Middle East, however, has fundamentally altered the contemporary landscape of skilled international labour migration...as these places strive to attract global talent and build competitiveness, a number of important questions are realised with respect to the transformation of local labour markets and reproduction of expatriate labour markets.⁹

Gulf labor markets are a construction of international labor migration, in divergent trends among professional service sector norms, as well as in the low-wage service sector. Just as poverty and poor governance drive people to leave their home countries in search of employment, there are parallel drivers of higher-wage migration in the building of global cities, as they replicate professional service economies in banking, accounting, management consulting, and media. Ideas travel with people and with corporates. There are layers of global economic integration that motivate ideas about workplace culture, appropriate hiring practices, and ideal colleagues. That is to say, the impediments to women's labor market participation in the Gulf do not necessarily originate only in Gulf societies or solely as results of their political and cultural institutions. It can also be that preferences in hiring and employment relations at the firm level reproduce and replicate patriarchal systems from other countries, specifically Western norms about workplace hierarchies and bias against women.

The migration patterns of Gulf labor markets could be creating, entrenching, and sustaining barriers to national women's employment and economic empowerment within their own societies. Moreover, Ewers and Dicce identify the broad segmentation trends that come along with international labor migration, which include gender, but are also stratified by class, ethnicity, and national origin.¹⁰ The Gulf's "ethnocracy," as Anh Nga Longva describes it, privileges local ethnic groups (presumably, Gulf nationals of Sunni tribal origin) over outsiders, while also creating hierarchies that create favoritism and discrimination in labor force policy and practice.¹¹ However, as Ewers and Dicce point out, there are multiple ways to engage and measure the experiences of both migrants and the nationals in their encounters.¹² Change, idea flows, and mutual influence shape the social (and, arguably, political) spaces of new Gulf cities.

Understanding the overlay of migration effects, domestic political institutions, and cultural practice requires a deep examination of the domestic politics of the Gulf states. Politics does happen in the Gulf, and citizens are not absent from political life and governance, yet there is a lack of data and ethnographic detail of exactly how this politics unfolds, and how it

The migration patterns of Gulf labor markets could be creating, entrenching, and sustaining barriers to national women's employment and economic empowerment within their own societies.

⁹ Michael C. Ewers and Ryan Dicce, "Expatriate Labour Markets in Rapidly Globalizing Cities: Reproducing the Migrant Division of Labour in Abu Dhabi and Dubai," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (April 2016): 1-20, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2016.1175926.

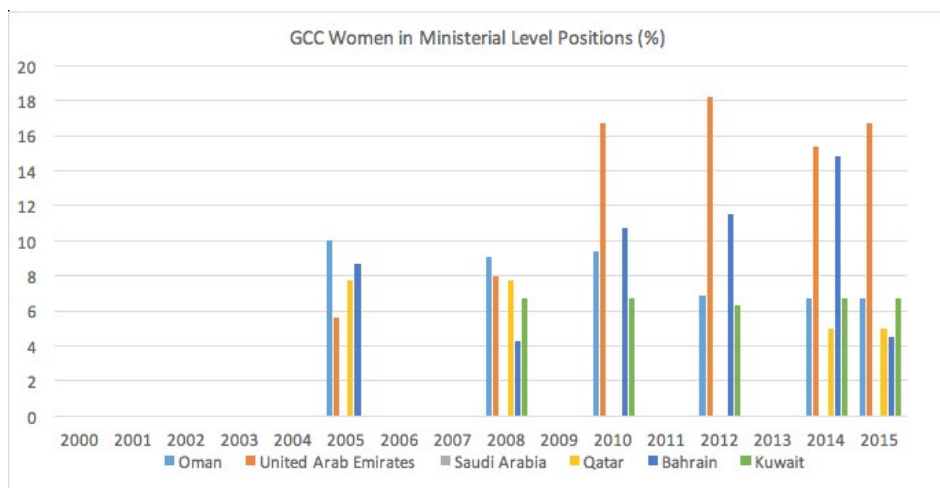
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Anh Nga Longva, "Neither Autocracy Nor Democracy but Ethnocracy," in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalisation and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, eds. Paul Dresch and James Piscatori (New York: IB Tauris, 2005), 114-35.

¹² Michael C. Ewers and Ryan Dicce, "Expatriate Labour Markets in Rapidly Globalizing Cities: Reproducing the Migrant Division of Labour in Abu Dhabi and Dubai," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (April 2016): 6, doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2016.1175926.

varies across the region. The emerging literature on diversity across the Gulf, particularly on issues related to women's social and economic inclusion reveals some startling differences. For example, in work by Fakir Al Gharaibeh, he details similarities between Gulf states in education systems, particularly in access to tertiary education, yet the reception and use of the benefit varies.¹³ Qatar and the UAE have government-funded scholarships for women to study abroad, while Oman and Bahrain do not. In Oman, women have struggled historically to gain access to degree programs in agriculture or engineering, according to Al Gharaibeh. Government incentives and social norms have created protective pipelines for men to take on coveted ministry jobs, particularly in science and engineering. He claims there are social norms that deter Omani women from pursuing university degrees, yet women's educational attainment tends to outpace men's throughout the GCC. New research might try to explain variation between cases by looking at both internal and external influences. There is a certain change, however, in women's political inclusion in government leadership positions over the last decade, with some states making pointed efforts to appoint women as a matter of public policy.

Chart 1a



Source: World Bank

Political life in the Gulf is subject to frequent recalibration, though much of that politics remains difficult to empirically measure and uncover. However, examining United Nations Development Programme data on gender inequality two points immediately stand out: the considerable diversity across the GCC in labor force participation and gender equality rankings, and a general trend of women's lack of labor force participation – no more than half of the population of national women in any of the Gulf Arab states is in the workforce.

¹³ Fakir M. Al Gharaibeh, "An Exploration of the Evolution of Women's Roles in Societies of the Gulf Cooperation Council," *Social Development Issues* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 22-44.

Chart 1b

Gender Inequality Index									
Country	Gender Inequality Index		Maternal mortality ratio	Adolescent birth rate	Share of seats in parliament	Population with at least some secondary education			
	Value	Rank	(deaths per 100,000 live births)	(births per 1,000 women ages 15–19)	(% held by women)	(% ages 25 and older)		Labour force participation rate (% ages 15 and older)	
	2014	2014	2013	2010/2015	2014	2005–2014	2005–2014	2013	2013
Qatar	0.524	116	6	9.5	0.0	66.7	59.0	50.8	95.5
Saudi Arabia	0.284	56	16	10.2	19.9	60.5	70.3	20.2	78.3
United Arab Emirates	0.232	47	8	27.6	17.5	73.1	61.2	46.5	92.0
Bahrain	0.265	51	22	13.8	15.0	56.7	51.4	39.2	86.9
Kuwait	0.387	79	14	14.5	1.5	55.6	56.3	43.6	83.1
Oman	0.275	53	11	10.6	9.6	47.2	57.1	29.0	82.6

Notes: The higher the "Value" and "Rank," the greater the inequality between genders.

Source: United Nations Development Programme -- Table 5: Gender Inequality Index

The available data combining women's educational attainment and women's political inclusion and representation within national parliaments is also slightly misleading. Charts 2 through 6, for five of the six GCC states, show World Development indicators on education attainment for women combined with the percent of women representatives as total members in parliament. The simple measure of women's presence in elected or even appointed councils may not represent a public policy advocacy of women's equality by the state, but it could signal either a bottom up effort by women to run and put themselves forward for these positions, or a top down effort to use women as representatives in government-approved debate spaces.

Chart 2

Bahrain			
Level of Education			Percent of Women in Parliament
Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	
18%	35%	14%	8%

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators; *Labor force with primary, secondary, and tertiary education (2010), female (% of female labor force) Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments(2015)*

Chart 3

Kuwait			
Level of Education			Percent of Women in Parliament
Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	
24%	17%	20%	2%

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators; *Labor force with primary, secondary, and tertiary education (2011), female (% of female labor force) Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments(2015)*

Chart 4

Oman			
<i>Level of Education</i>			<i>Percent of Women in Parliament</i>
<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Tertiary</i>	
14%	43%	32%	1%

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators; *Labor force with primary, secondary, and tertiary education (2000), female (% of female labor force)Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments(2015)*

Chart 5

Saudi Arabia			
<i>Level of Education</i>			<i>Percent of Women in Parliament</i>
<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Tertiary</i>	
23%	18%	40%	20%

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators; *Labor force with primary, secondary, and tertiary education (2009), female (% of female labor force)Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments(2015)*

Chart 6

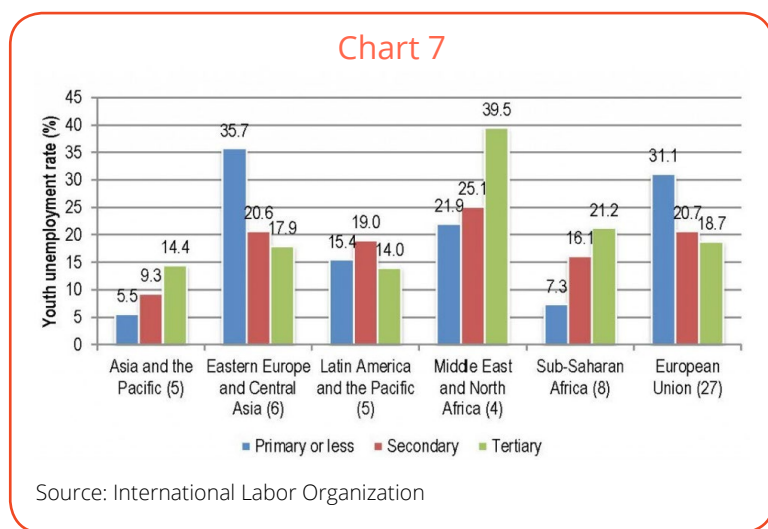
UAE			
<i>Level of Education</i>			<i>Percent of Women in Parliament</i>
<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Tertiary</i>	
18%	32%	30%	23%

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators; *Labor force with primary, secondary, and tertiary education (2011), female (% of female labor force)Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments(2015)*

From this World Bank data, there is the impression that (national) women are most educated and most represented within parliamentary institutions in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Women participated in municipal council elections (as voters and candidates) in Saudi Arabia for the first time in late 2015 and won at least 17 of around 2,000 contested seats.¹⁴ In Qatar, there were two women of 29 members on the municipal council as of 2016; of the appointed members of the Shura council, there are no women.¹⁵ Underlying these points are more complex realities of women's economic inclusion.

Women in Saudi Arabia, for example, are consumers of education, and sit on the Shura council, yet their employment metrics tell a different story – a story about lost human capital and frozen mobility. In Bahrain, a smaller proportion of women are able to access or complete tertiary education, and fewer are elected and serve in Parliament, yet their labor force participation rates and arguably their impact in terms of political voice are more substantial than in neighboring Saudi Arabia. The female Shura council appointments in Saudi Arabia may increase women's presence in a proportional measure, but do little to increase women's policy impact. Those Bahraini women who do serve in elected or appointed capacities, including ambassador rank, have likely enjoyed more direct impact in policymaking. The dissonance begins to explain some of the structural barriers to full economic and political participation within the Gulf states for national women. Often the institutions are in place for training, as are the incentives for women to join the workforce, yet participation remains low. Political participation, likewise, through representative institutions remains limited for all citizens, especially for women. The dimensions of non-national labor force participation, hiring practices, norms, and ideational influence further complicate the possible explanations for variation.

There is a paradox in the GCC countries, in that there is an abundance of wealth in human capital, but it is not utilized to its full potential. Women are generally better educated than men across the GCC, yet they are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed. Women in Saudi Arabia account for nearly 60 percent of university graduates, but less than 20 percent of Saudi women enter the workforce after graduation, according to Booz & Company.¹⁶ Of those women who are actively looking for work, almost 80 percent have university degrees.



¹⁴ Ben Hubbard, "In Milestone, Saudis Elect First Women to Councils," *The New York Times*, December 13, 2015.

¹⁵ "Qatar: Events of 2015," *Human Rights Watch*, accessed November 3, 2016.

¹⁶ Christina Maria Paschyn, "Women In the Gulf: Better Educated But Less Employed," *Al-Fanar Media*, October 16, 2013.

Unfortunately, the trend holds across the Middle East and North Africa, according to a new report by the International Labour Organization.¹⁷ Those young women (and men) with better education or more advanced degrees are more likely to be unemployed.

The World Bank is also studying this trend, as it relates to inequality and conflict.¹⁸ There is a sense among youth in the Middle East and North Africa region that they cannot get ahead, not because of educational attainment or income disparity (or “monetary inequality” as the World Bank calls it), but because of “perceptions of falling standards of living,” which include a lack of formal sector jobs, but more importantly, dissatisfaction with the quality of public services and the lack of ability to voice concerns and demand accountability. Corruption and cronyism, or *wasta*, are also part of the subjective indicators researchers like Elena Ianchovichina and her colleagues at the World Bank are finding as causal factors in the rise of regional discontent. Moreover, across the region, survey respondents describe the private sector as dominated by elites who hamper the entry of new firms and new job opportunities for outsiders.

There is a development paradox in which education access is not the problem for men or women; major indicators of poverty have been improving across the Arab world in the last decade. Yet, young people are not finding the jobs or careers, or achieving the well-being, that they seek. This discontent, or what scholars have called “unhappy development,” may contribute to uprisings and conflict in the Arab world.¹⁹ The full engagement of women’s economic and political participation seems integral to solving this development puzzle. The Global Gender Gap 2014 report from the World Economic Forum demonstrates this paradox within the Gulf.²⁰ Women tend to be well-educated by international standards, yet they lag behind in economic participation and opportunity.

Across the GCC, employment opportunity lags behind educational achievement, with some important case variation. Kuwait has been the most successful in achieving more equal participation of women in the workforce, along with higher rates of educational attainment. Women make up 67 percent of university graduates in Kuwait and at least 51 percent of women work. The public sector employs many Kuwaiti women, and they make up 55.5 percent of the national public sector workforce. The disparity in educational attainment

Chart 8

Country	Economic Participation and Opportunity	Educational Attainment
Qatar	101	94
UAE	123	83
Oman	128	96
Bahrain	126	90
Kuwait	106	76
Saudi Arabia	137	86

Global ranking, lower scores indicate better performance among country peers.
Source: [Global Gender Gap 2014 Report](#), World Economic Forum

¹⁷ International Labour Organization, [Global Employment Trends for Youth 2015](#) (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2015).

¹⁸ Elena Ianchovichina, Lili Mottaghi, and Shantayanan Devarajan, [Inequality, Uprisings, and Conflict in the Arab World](#) (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2015).

¹⁹ Efstratia Arampatzi, Martijn Burger, Elena Ianchovichina, Tina Rohricht, and Ruut Veenhoven, [Unhappy Development: Dissatisfaction with Life on the Eve of the Arab Spring](#) (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2015).

²⁰ World Economic Forum, [The Global Gender Gap Report 2014](#) (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014), 8-9.

and economic participation is most striking in Saudi Arabia, perhaps not surprisingly, where women's opportunity to engage fully in the workforce faces many institutional and social barriers. According to data collected by the Gulf Labor Markets and Migration project, Saudi women are a small minority of the working population.²¹ In 2013, Saudi women were just over 6 percent of the workforce. In Qatar, 54 percent of university-age women are enrolled in universities compared to only 28 percent of their male counterparts, according to the Qatar National Development Strategy. Men have other, perhaps better paid, opportunities, including military service. As a counter measure that has perhaps had a knock-off effect on stimulating private sector employment of Gulf nationals (and creating new opportunities for women), Gulf states boosted salaries in the public sector after the 2011 Arab Spring; for example, Qatari military personnel received 120 percent pay raises in 2011.²² In the UAE, according to a report by UNICEF, the proportion of women over age 15 in the working-age population who actively engage in the labor market (either by working or looking for work) is less than half that of men (42 percent compared to 92 percent).²³ The global average is not much better, at 52 percent, but the global average of literacy rates is not nearly as high as they are in the GCC. According to data from 2005, 97 percent of female youth are literate in the UAE. Women are also more likely to be enrolled in higher education in the UAE than young men (41 percent compared to 22 percent).

The disparity in educational attainment and economic participation is most striking in Saudi Arabia...

Transforming Labor Markets in the Gulf

Since the 1960s, the Gulf Arab states' economic model has relied on foreign labor to build infrastructure, create and staff public institutions from schools to hospitals to police forces, and create a service sector that underpins much of social and cultural life in the region. A half century later, this system, in which the state has played the leading role in directing economic growth, faces a rocky transition. In order to continue to provide the social welfare that citizens have grown to expect, governments have two stark choices. They must find a new source, besides carbon resource wealth, to generate funds for outlays in subsidies, public sector wages, and continued expansion in real estate and infrastructure. Or, governments must reduce spending, exit from the market by privatizing state-owned entities, and radically change the way that labor markets function, relying more on private sector growth and the employment of nationals. In the latter scenario, cheap, largely male labor forces from Asia will need to be sent home, to be replaced with citizens, both men and women, who will be paid competitive, living wages. The onus on a nascent private sector to provide employment, specifically at a higher cost to its profit margins, will be challenging. Societies will also grapple with a revolution in service culture and hospitality, in which nationals will need to serve, not only be served. National women will need to be more visible – more present in a range

²¹ ["Gulf Labour Markets and Migration," Gulf Research Center](#), accessed November 7, 2016.

²² ["To Stave Off Arab Spring Revolts, Saudi Arabia and Fellow Gulf Countries Spend \\$150 Billion," Knowledge@Wharton](#), September 21, 2011.

²³ UNICEF, [United Arab Emirates: MENA Gender Equality Profile](#) (New York: UNICEF, 2011).

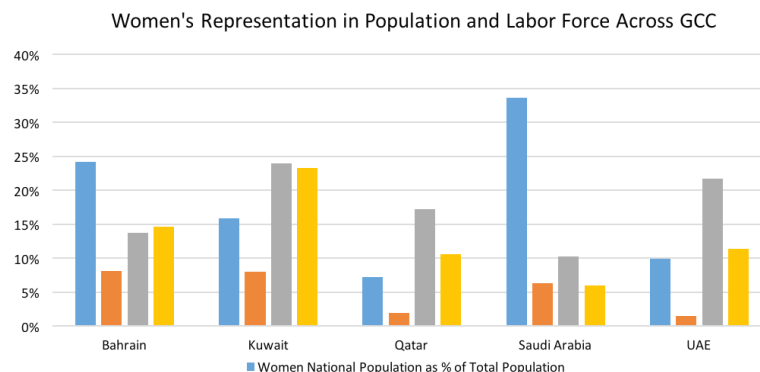
of workplaces that are currently unfamiliar. This necessary transformation would seem impossible; however, Gulf citizens have already successfully navigated significant change over just the last two generations.

Where Women Work

Examining women's representation in the labor force across the GCC, notably, non-national women are proportionally more present than national women. This suggests that being a woman is not a wholesale barrier to employment, but rather being a national or citizen is an obstacle. Bahrain and Kuwait are the GCC states with the highest labor participation of national women, and the highest levels of non-national women labor participation. In Kuwait and Bahrain it is generally easier to be a working woman, regardless of nationality. Why there are fewer barriers, or different kinds of barriers, is a vital question for further investigation. What are the different policy choices within Kuwait and Bahrain that make employment and mobility possible? Or, does economic necessity drive women (especially nationals) to seek employment?

In other cases, such as the UAE, large populations of non-national women are also absent from the workforce. These are the trailing spouses of the expatriate community. Might a culture of women's exclusion from political and economic life encourage women to opt out of working? Or is it the expatriate community that is exerting influence on the national female population, further discouraging their engagement in the workplace? In 2005, 1.3 million women were living in the UAE, yet only about 300,000 women were in the workforce, at least 283,000 of whom were expatriates. National women in the workforce were less than 3 percent of the female population.

Chart 9



The data was based on each country's most recent figures on women's labor by population and labor force. National and non-national women's population and labor of each country was divided by total population and labor respectively. There was not enough data to include Oman.

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; Bahrain: "Labour Market Regulatory Authority," "Central Informatics Organization"; Kuwait: "Public Authority for Civil Information"; Qatar: "Labour Force Sample Surveys, 2006 to 2009 and 2011 to 2013; Census 2010," "Qatar Statistics Authority"; Saudi Arabia: "Labour Force Surveys (1999 to 2002; 2006 to 2009; 2011 to 2013 R1)," "Central Department for Statistics and Information"; UAE: "Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; National Bureau of Statistics (UAE Ministry of Economy)."

Chart 10

Bahrain				
	<i>Population (Women)</i>		<i>Women's Labor Force</i>	
	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>
2003	220,532	91,088	29,699	35,032
2004	230,021	102,526	31,219	37,826
2005	239,922	115,404	33,908	44,788
2006	250,243	129,895	36,157	49,067
2007	261,013	146,210	38,295	54,357
2008	267,975	158,931	39,565	60,413
2009	276,000	170,418	46,189	70,669
2010	282,235	181,951	44,915	75,715
2011	288,810	164,727	46,234	77,027
2012	N/A	N/A	47,593	82,096
2013	N/A	N/A	51,088	89,987
2014	N/A	N/A	53,574	96,993

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; "Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) -- Bahrain," ; Central Informatics Organization (CIO) -- Bahrain

Chart 11

Kuwait				
	<i>Population (Women)</i>		<i>Women's Labor Force</i>	
	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>
2010	584,712	846,995	N/A	N/A
2011	602,616	872,983	N/A	N/A
2012	617,071	905,824	178,560	496,972
2013	631,954	950,232	185,991	543,377
2014	649,601	960,857	N/A	N/A

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; "Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI)"

Chart 12

Qatar					
	<i>Population (Women)</i>			<i>Women's Labor Force</i>	
	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>
2006	N/A	N/A	N/A	19,447	57,767
2007	N/A	N/A	N/A	21,223	79,608
2008	N/A	N/A	N/A	24,815	97,928
2009	N/A	N/A	N/A	25,402	97,983
2010	122,337	292,359	414,696	24,908	128,134
2011	N/A	N/A	N/A	25,145	127,789
2012	N/A	N/A	N/A	26,992	140,404
2013	N/A	N/A	N/A	30,256	163,169

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; "Labour Force Sample Surveys, 2006 to 2009 and 2011 to 2013; Census 2010 (Qatar)" ; Qatar Statistics Authority

Chart 13

Saudi Arabia				
	<i>Population (Women)</i>		<i>Women's Labor Force</i>	
	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>
1999	7,228,960	1,641,438	347,370	444,863
2000	7,412,968	1,684,952	351,279	418,548
2001	7,601,651	1,729,617	363,193	417,699
2002	7,795,126	1,775,464	364,366	432,817
2003	7,993,515	1,822,524	N/A	N/A
2004	8,198,412	1,871,564	N/A	N/A
2005	8,401,060	1,968,899	N/A	N/A
2006	8,606,584	2,071,296	494,279	567,218
2007	8,814,670	2,179,018	503,879	545,002
2008	9,024,301	2,292,343	482,313	583,149
2009	9,235,696	2,411,561	505,340	573,214
2010	9,448,437	2,536,980	N/A	N/A
2011	9,662,059	2,672,935	604,402	697,692
2012	9,876,017	2,766,151	646,590	682,914
2013	10,090,040	3,079,936	679,862	641,489
2014	10,303,543	3,200,507	N/A	N/A

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; "Labour Force Surveys (1999 to 2002; 2006 to 2009; 2011 to 2013 R1)"; Central Department for Statistics and Information (CDSI)

Chart 14

UAE					
	<i>Population (Women)</i>			<i>Women's Labor Force</i>	
	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>Non-National</i>
2005	407,578	892,697	1,300,275	38,031	283,183

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; National Bureau of Statistics (UAE Ministry of Economy)

Human Capital Deployment: National and Non-National Barriers to Productivity

The potential for economic development and state capacity improves in those pockets where human capital thrives. The institutional settings that cultivate human capital are ones that have strategically used migrants to *build* and *populate* the institutions that amplify state capacity. Migrants, in turn, have a dynamic role in *shaping* the political sphere they inhabit. Human capital of both women and men is therefore essential to the economic development process, as is the human capital of those who are noncitizens.

The demographic explosion across the GCC in the last two decades has created demand for new employees, particularly in low-wage work contributing to infrastructure development, but also demand for higher-wage jobs. As nationals with newly minted qualifications seek employment, there is added pressure on governments to absorb employees. The GCC states have an employment crisis, driven by a state-led growth model that used cheap imported labor and cheap energy (diverted from possible export revenue) to build infrastructure and a bloated public sector to subsidize income for nationals. The model created many good things, but it is not sustainable. The demographic bulge of a young, better-educated (than their parents and grandparents), and socially mobile population demands high wages and opportunity. The state cannot continue to create jobs with low productivity, starving the private sector of potential innovators, while keeping government job wages artificially high. Productivity has been declining since the 1980s across the GCC states, as the World Economic Forum and many others have recognized.²⁴

In a new study by the International Monetary Fund, researchers point to the last economic downturn when oil prices collapsed in 1986, and slowed economic growth through the early 1990s, as the region's "Greatest Depression." During that time, per capita consumption fell by nearly 20 percent and did not recover until the late 2000s, during the most recent oil boom.²⁵ In fact, as Reda Cherif and Fuad Hasanov argue, the relative income of GCC countries has fallen in the last 30 years, as low productivity has dampened growth potential.²⁶ Gross domestic product per worker (in purchasing parity dollars) has dropped and between 1980 and 2010 GCC states deteriorated in relative income rankings to U.S. GDP levels or below (for most). Qatar even decreased from three times the U.S. level to double the U.S. income per worker. Total factor productivity declined in all of the six GCC countries over the three decades. The evidence suggests that as the Gulf states have grown wealthy, and grown in population size,

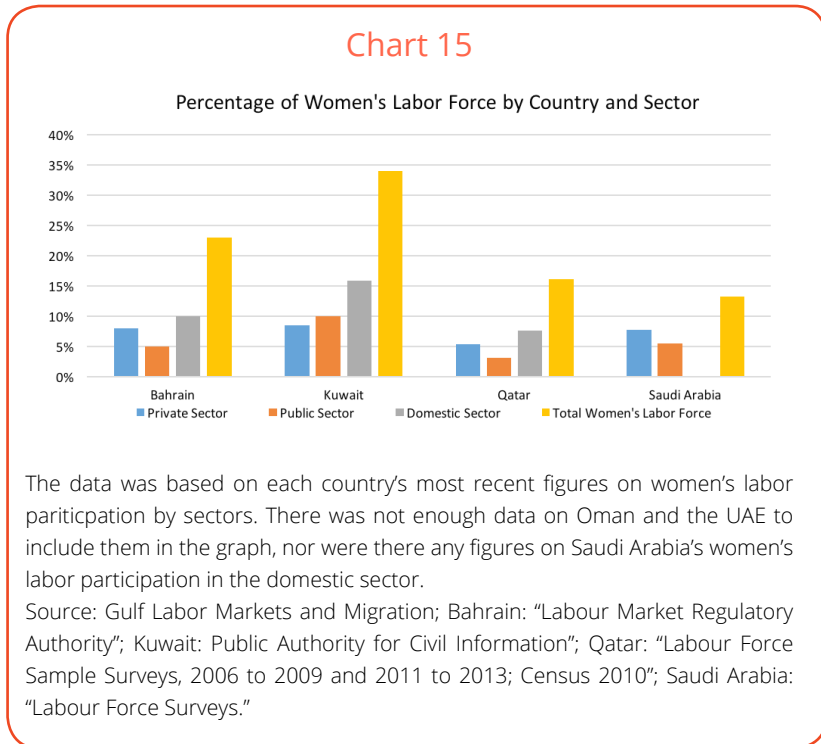
²⁴ World Economic Forum, [Rethinking Arab Employment: A Systemic Approach for Resource-Endowed Economies](#) (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2014), [Part II](#).

²⁵ Reda Cherif, Fuad Hasanov, and Min Zhu, eds., [Breaking the Oil Spell: The Gulf Falcons' Path to Diversification](#) (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2016).

²⁶ Reda Cherif and Fuad Hasanov, ["Soaring of the Gulf Falcons: Diversification of the GCC Oil Exporters in Seven Propositions,"](#) (International Monetary Fund Working Paper WP/14/177, September 2014).

their economies have become more difficult environments in which to live and work. People's lives have improved, in terms of education and access to social services, yet the effort to generate wealth and productivity is limited.²⁷

Part of the productivity problem is the preference for and prevalence of national employment in the public sector. Of the places in which national women have found employment, they are overrepresented as a whole within government jobs. The data on women's employment by sector reveal these imbalances. Charts 16 through 19 include all women, nationals and non-nationals. For a more detailed view of national women in public sector employment, see Chart 15. The data also reveals (where it is available – data is not included for the UAE or Oman, nor is there data for Saudi Arabia's domestic sector) that there is a large column of women's work that is neither officially public or private, but rather work that takes place in the home. The domestic service sector is nearly entirely filled by non-national females, which can account for larger numbers of working women (where they are tabulated this way by national statistics services). These workers and their jobs reinforce norms about appropriate women's work and which women should perform it.



Likewise, the separation of national women as public rather than private sector employees has cultural and social implications, whereby national women might lack incentives to join private sector workplaces dominated by men and non-national women. This is the problem of invisibility of national women in private sector workplaces; the less likely women are to find mentors and role models for their own career trajectories, the more difficult it is for them to break through as pioneering national female employees. The lack of flexibility in the job market, especially within the private sector, serves as another barrier to women's inclusion. Recent reporting on the future of work and the use of technology to help workers, especially women, work from home or work more informally without strict visa procedures or in part-time capacities could have some benefit, at least in cultural shifts within the workplace.²⁸ Structural issues, such as the *kafala* system and the consistent pay and benefit differentials between

²⁷ This section includes excerpts from: Karen E. Young, "[This Time We Mean It: Staying the Course on Economic Reforms](#)," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 7, 2016.

²⁸ Stian Overdahl, "It's Time to Face the Future," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, May 16, 2016.

private and public sector employment remain obstacles for national women in the private sector. Legal restrictions on women's financial and physical mobility also vary considerably across the GCC states, and specifically pose significant barriers to employment for women in Saudi Arabia.²⁹

Chart 16

Kuwait				
<i>Women's Labor Force</i>				
	<i>Non-Governmental</i>	<i>Governmental</i>	<i>Domestic</i>	Total
2012	7%	8%	13%	28%
2013	8%	10%	16%	34%

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; see Employed population by nationality (Kuwaiti/non-Kuwaiti), activity sector, sex and age group (2013); Employed population by nationality (Kuwaiti/non-Kuwaiti), activity sector and sex (2012)

Chart 17

Qatar				
<i>Women's Labor Force</i>				
	<i>Private</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Domestic</i>	Total
2006				15%
2007				12%
2008				11%
2009				10%
2010	3%	2%	7%	12%
2011				12%
2012	4%	2%	7%	13%
2013	4%	2%	6%	13%
2014	5%	3%	8%	16%

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; see Employed population (15 years and above) by nationality (Qatar/non-Qatari) and sex (2006-2013); Qatar: Economically active population aged 15 and above by nationality (Qatari/non-Qatari), sex and activity sector (2014); Economically active population aged 15 and above by nationality (Qatari/non-Qatari), sex and activity sector (2013); Economically active population by nationality (Qatari/non-Qatari), sex and activity sector (2012); Employed population by nationality (Qatari/non-Qatari), activity sector and sex (2010)

²⁹ Hala Aldosari, "The Personal is Political: Gender Identity in the Personal Status Laws of the Gulf Arab States," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, August 29, 2016.

Chart 18

Bahrain				
<i>Women's Labor Force</i>				
	<i>Private</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Domestic</i>	Total
2003	8%	5%	7%	20%
2004	8%	5%	8%	21%
2005	7%	5%	8%	20%
2006	7%	5%	8%	20%
2007	7%	4%	8%	20%
2008	7%	4%	8%	20%
2009	8%	4%	8%	20%
2010	8%	4%	9%	20%
2011	8%	4%	9%	21%
2012	8%	4%	9%	21%
2013	8%	4%	9%	22%
2014	8%	5%	10%	23%

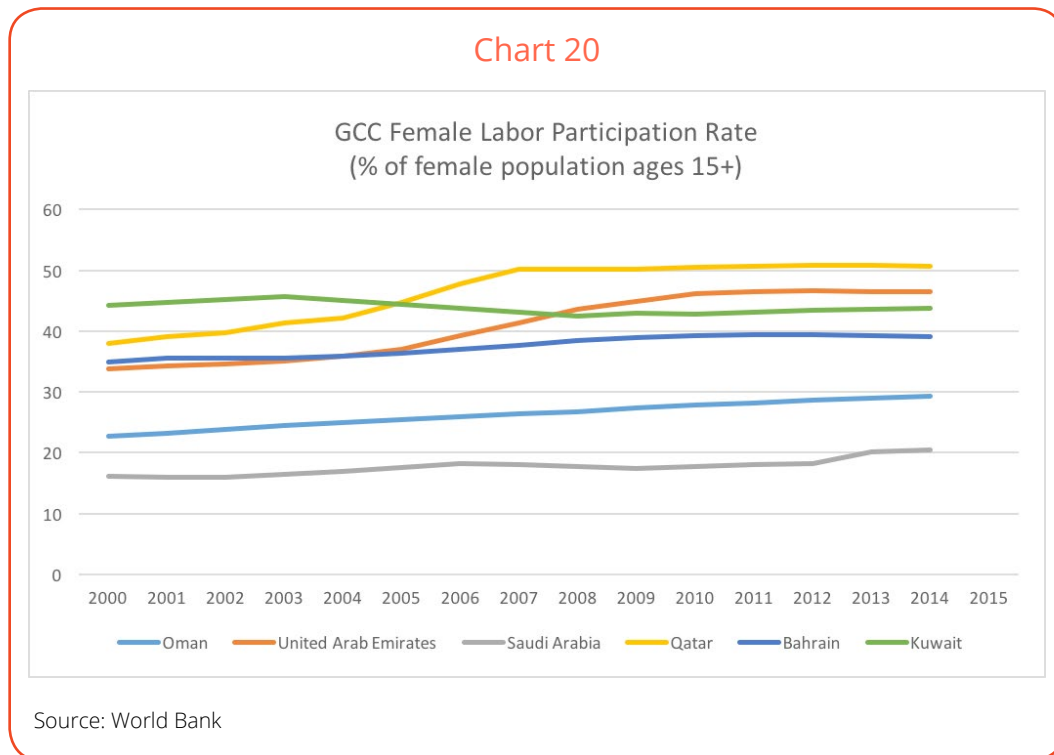
Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; see Bahrain: Estimated total employed Non-Bahraini population by sex and sector (public, private, domestic) (Quarterly, 2003-2014) ; Bahrain: Estimated total employed Bahraini population by sex and sector (public, private, domestic) (Quarterly: Q1 2003 – Q1 2014)

Chart 19

Saudi Arabia			
<i>Women's Labor Force</i>			
	<i>Private</i>	<i>Public</i>	Total
1999			14%
2000			13%
2001			13%
2002			13%
2003			
2004			
2005			
2006	7%	6%	14%
2007			14%
2008			13%
2009	8%	5%	13%
2010			
2011			13%
2012			13%
2013			12%

Source: Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; see Employed population (aged 15 and above) by nationality (Saudi/ non-Saudi) and sector of activity (Government/ Private), 2006; 2009 ; Employed population by nationality (Saudi / non-Saudi) and sex, 1999-2013

Likewise, there are mixed messages in the rate of growth of women's participation in the workforce across the GCC states. Where there has been an increase in women's employment, it is difficult to ascertain if national women have been part of the growth, or if cheaper foreign labor is crowding out national women's potential inclusion.



Oil Dependency and Women's Exclusion

One area that is particularly vexing for research on the resource curse is the persistent relationship between oil-rich states and patriarchy, or the exclusion of women from both political and economic participation. Michael Ross argues that petroleum wealth in particular perpetuates patriarchy.³⁰ His argument is that the traditional inclusion of women into low-wage and low-tech employment (specifically manufacturing) has been impossible in petro-states that skipped over the manufacturing industrialization process. This has blocked the path of women's political and economic empowerment (and reinforced cultural taboos). Women's labor force participation has the advantage of "boosting" political influence on three levels, according to Ross: at the individual level by changing identities and social roles in the family; at the social level by bringing women together in the workplace to foster political networking; and at the level of the national economy with the added purchasing power from women's independent earnings making them visible to policymakers. The comparative politics literature on women's participation and political empowerment supports the idea that women's early labor participation, cross-nationally, has some important patterns. Manufacturing has

³⁰ Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), Chapter 4.

allowed women to take jobs that require little physical strength and offer lower wages so that they do not compete with men, and therefore have created new spaces for women's political organizing. Ross gives the case example of South Korea's economic liberalization of the 1980s in which women took on manufacturing roles and then widened political participation within a traditionally patriarchal culture.³¹ Examining the variable of women's labor participation in Gulf states, in both citizen and migrant populations, should help to explain any relationship between economic diversification and women's inclusion in political and economic life.

Taking petroleum production as a percentage of GDP as a measure of resource dependency, and comparing it across the GCC states with measures of women's labor force participation offers support to Ross' hypotheses. Where petroleum production is a higher percentage of GDP, there is a general lower proportion of women in the workforce (among nationals and non-nationals). Saudi Arabia and Qatar are at the extremes, where women are less visible as workers and the state is more reliable on resource wealth. Bahrain stands out for its relatively higher proportion of working women, and its relatively lower reliance on oil exports as a percentage of GDP.

Chart 21

Saudi Arabia				
	Petroleum Production as Percentage of GDP	Women's Labor Force		
		Private	Public	Total
1999	33%			14%
2000	41%			13%
2001	37%			13%
2002	37%			13%
2003	41%			
2004	43%			
2005	50%			
2006	51%	7%	6%	14%
2007	50%			14%
2008	55%			13%
2009	41%	8%	5%	13%
2010	45%			
2011	51%			13%
2012	50%			13%
2013	47%			12%

Source: *Gulf Labor Markets and Migration; "Labour Force Surveys"*; Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA)

³¹ Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Chart 22

Bahrain					
	Petroleum Production as Percentage of GDP	Women's Labor Force			
		Private	Public	Domestic	Total
2009	22%	23%	14%	11%	48%
2010	21%	23%	15%	11%	49%
2011	21%	23%	15%	11%	50%
2012	19%	23%	16%	12%	51%
2013	21%	23%	18%	12%	53%
2014	20%	23%	18%	13%	54%

Source: *Gulf Labor Markets and Migration*; "Labour Force Surveys"; Central Informatics Organization (Bahrain)

Chart 23

Qatar					
	Petroleum Production as Percentage of GDP	Women's Labor Force			
		Private	Public	Domestic	Total
2009	45%				10%
2010	53%	3%	2%	7%	12%
2011	59%				12%

Source: *Gulf Labor Markets and Migration*; "Labour Force Surveys"; Qatar Information Exchange

Ross argues (and demonstrates statistically) that oil wealth creates specific effects on women's labor force and political participation. Oil rich states of the Middle East (i.e., Gulf states) tend to have the poorest performance in integrating women into the labor force. One cause is that oil booms, especially oil wealth increases after 1970, have not created the kinds of jobs that women might use to organize politically, or specifically to organize on labor rights issues in the private sector. Historically, light manufacturing jobs have proved useful grounds for women's organizing. Oil booms, however, tend to create jobs in the service sector, construction, and retail, and in the expansion of government, Ross argues. Inside the Gulf, most of the private sector jobs have been filled by migrants, while nationals have populated the expanding state institutions. Women have had success in finding public sector employment across the Gulf, but even there, states have reserved certain pathways to public sector employment for male citizens. As an example of the exclusion of women from pipelines of key ministry employment, in Oman, the policy of privileging men for certain public sector employment may have had the effect of discouraging women from university training in engineering and agriculture.

Ross also concedes that "cultural" explanations for women's exclusion in political and economic institutions are not consistent throughout the Middle East. In fact, as he finds, there is striking variation across the region, with some countries boasting more than a quarter of the workforce populated by national women, while others lag with less than 5 percent. Voting rights are equally disparate, with some women of the wider Middle East and North Africa region gaining suffrage only in the last decade, while other countries have had women voters since the early 1940s. Oil production, however, correlates with the status of women; those

countries that are the richest in oil wealth are also the countries with the lowest numbers of women in representative political institutions and nonagricultural employment, and are the most reluctant (or latest) to grant female suffrage.³²

Looking cross-regionally, Ross finds that oil production does not necessarily have to correlate with reduced women's political and economic opportunity. The oil-rich states that have been able to incorporate women into professional and service sector employment also tend to fair better with women's political inclusion (i.e., Norway, New Zealand, Australia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Syria, and Mexico). The causal pathways here are certainly more complex, but the relationships do acknowledge that there is something specific to the Middle East and North Africa context, specifically the Gulf, in which oil production (and dependency) is deleterious to women's political and, more so, economic inclusion. The post-Socialist effect of years of women's inclusion into government bureaucracy may have helped in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; while Syria and Mexico have histories of secular, leftist party organization in the political sphere. In the cases of Norway, New Zealand, and Australia, parliamentary democracies along with more diversified economies, including significant manufacturing sectors, may have protected women's organizing space and rising economic power.³³

...there is something specific to the Middle East and North Africa context, specifically the Gulf, in which oil production (and dependency) is deleterious to women's political and, more so, economic inclusion.

Conclusion

The GCC states have been inundated with change over the past 30 years, in the expanding multicultural composition of their societies and in their shared exposure to consumption patterns and new forms of government and commercial institutions. Work culture and gender are no exceptions. Now is perhaps a critical time to try to identify patterns of change across the GCC in the economic and political inclusion of women. Do the states that have made more progress in women's participation in the labor force also provide better political participation opportunities for women? Is there a commonality between migrant and citizen women in the workforce, or is there a negative relationship in which the dominance of low-wage employment of migrant women (particularly in entry-level employment of manufacturing and retail) further enforces a patriarchal political economy? How are migrant women dominant in certain sectors of employment and might this affect citizen women's ability to penetrate higher-wage/higher-qualification employment (and subsequent political networking opportunities)?

A preliminary examination of data on women's labor force participation across the GCC states, in both migrant and national populations, reveals some interesting variance. Where women's labor participation is particularly low, in both national and migrant populations, there seems to be a mutual reinforcing effect. The traveling global labor markets, especially those that populate financial services and the demands of "global cities," may also contribute ideas about

³² Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 125.

³³ *Ibid.*, 131.

appropriate work spaces for women, both expatriate and national. The data also reveal that, indeed, there is a relationship between reliance on natural resource wealth as a proportion of GDP and the limited role of women in the labor force. However, there is clearly more work to be done to explore why these relationships exist and seem to persist across the GCC. The current youth population in the Gulf are encountering a workforce and economy that does not yet know how or where to place them. These young men and women (especially new female university graduates) will also be responsible for carving a place for themselves. How they articulate their needs and ambitions remains to be seen.

Increasing women's political and economic inclusion in Gulf societies seems to be a multifaceted challenge. The first is to acknowledge the demands of national women interested in joining the labor force and bridging the gap between education and employment. Mentoring programs, internships, and secondments from the public to private sector are good mechanisms to bridge between university or a first public sector job and more challenging private sector roles. Second, in professional services, especially roles in law, finance (excluding retail banking), and consulting, there are both training challenges and cultural obstacles, many of which are imported from Western financial centers as much as local customs that prioritize proximity to family and home. Third, in low-wage and entry-level employment, structural reforms to the kafala system will be needed to increase national women's labor participation. With the kafala system, low-wage migrant female labor has largely flooded the market for low-skill labor, keeping wages down and discouraging, both economically and culturally, national women from taking on service sector roles. Given the current fiscal realities of the GCC states, women's labor force participation has the benefit of becoming a necessity, which could forge new pathways to their political and economic inclusion.

