

# Chapter 7

## Through the Eye of the Needle: Lessons in Women's Empowerment and Public Policy from the Arab Gulf



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**Abstract** In this chapter, we challenge the dominant perspective that views the ‘universalization’ of the international agenda on women’s empowerment as the only way for states to both promote women’s rights and be seen as a legitimate modern state. Our study provides a comparative analysis of public policies and gender data from the six Arab Gulf nations (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) to examine the situation of women’s empowerment in the Arab Gulf region. We argue that the persistence of neoliberal capitalist frameworks and Western-defined human rights strategies has perpetuated orientalist discourses that contrast Arab cultures with Western ones. We assert that the international women’s agenda, by emphasizing neoliberal ideals, overlooks and devalues contexts where progress is not measured in individual terms, but rather requires prioritizing the family and household in women’s economic pursuits. Through this lens, we present Arab Gulf policy frameworks as important and effective strategies that prioritize the provision of care, support for work-life reconciliation, and the freedom to pursue progress for women who have different life goals beyond the neoliberal framework.

**Keywords** Public policy · Arab Gulf · Contextual embeddedness · Economic empowerment · Gender · Neoliberal discourse · Comparative study

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter defines empowerment, as derived from the second chapter, as a multi-faceted process that is rooted in local values, driven by agency, and enhanced by access to resources and seeking women’s well-being both at the individual and collective levels. This definition diverges from a narrow perspective that merely

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concentrates on women's economic status, ignoring their overall well-being. By embracing empowerment as context-specific, diverse, and genuine, the chapter aims to reject instrumentalist and neoliberal interpretations of 'individual power, achievement, and status' and instead highlights women's voices as critical elements (Batliwala, 2010). The chapter critiques the predominant discourse of the international women's empowerment agenda and its portrayal as the sole path for states to advance women's rights.

The international agenda on women's empowerment has primarily focused on economic empowerment as the most effective and politically feasible way to achieve wider empowerment outcomes. The standard metrics used to measure the success of government policies in this regard include women's participation in the labor force and representation in leadership positions. However, the care responsibilities of women are acknowledged as a hindrance to progress, and time spent on care work and domestic chores is seen as being at odds with advancing in these areas. The overarching objective of the international women's rights discourse is to increase women's participation in the workforce and decrease their disproportionate burden of household tasks. Governments are expected to adopt 'female-friendly' policies that promote gender balance, representation of women in leadership, and sufficient parental leave provisions, as demonstrated by clear public policy frameworks.

By examining the impact of the Arab Gulf policies on women's empowerment, we contend that the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism and Western-defined human rights strategies reinforces orientalist views that dichotomize Arab cultures from Western ones. Our analysis reveals that the international women's empowerment agenda, which prioritizes neoliberal ideals, overlooks the context-specific nature of women's progress and disregards the importance of the family and household in women's economic pursuits. Instead, we present Arab Gulf policies as alternative and valuable approaches that acknowledge and support the provisioning and visibility of care responsibilities, provide avenues for work-life reconciliation, and allow women to define their own success outside of the narrow confines of neoliberalism.

This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of public policies in the Arab Gulf region and their impact on women's economic empowerment. Our examination challenges the narrow, neoliberal definition of empowerment, which focuses solely on employment rates and leadership positions. By considering alternative pathways to enhancing women's agency and rights, we aim to shift the focus to the complexities of women's lives and the importance of prioritizing their voices and local narratives of empowerment.

We argue that the Arab Gulf states face tension between international standards and local demands in their policy frameworks. Additionally, we engage with the dominant agendas on women's empowerment and address four main challenges in the Arab Gulf context: demographics, workforce imbalances, fertility, and gender roles. We scrutinize the universality of the international women's agenda engage with critiques from the Arab world and present a contextual examination of the current public policy framework for women's empowerment in the region, including an analysis of constitutions, national development plans, and labor laws.

Our critique of the available data on women's empowerment highlights the impact of methodological and conceptual issues specific to the Arab Gulf context on the region's low performance in 'universal' gender equality metrics. However, we also recognize areas where the Arab Gulf policy frameworks have advanced ahead of many other states due to the consideration of contextual elements. Our analysis highlights the provisions made for women in the workplace and emphasizes the importance of understanding the local context and narratives of empowerment in defining progress. Through this examination, we aim to promote the voices of women and broaden the definition of women's economic empowerment beyond employment and leadership positions.

## 7.2 Women's Economic Empowerment in the International Agenda

The push for women's empowerment, particularly through employment, has gained significant attention in recent decades, starting with Esther Boserup's (1970) call to recognize the contributions of women in development and culminating in the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. This international agreement placed a strong emphasis on women's rights in public life and employment, shaping state policies and defining the discourse on women's empowerment for the years to come.

By 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPFA) further codified the state's responsibility to 'promote women's economic independence' by defining strategic objectives around women and the economy, and women in power and decision-making roles (United Nations, 1995).<sup>1</sup> This emphasis on women's labor force participation has roots in early feminist economic research that equated women's access to income with increased bargaining power within the household and improved fallback position<sup>2</sup> (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010). It also reflected the popular development discourses that identified women's value as a better investment than men's and highlighted women's instrumentality as purveyors of household welfare, investing more of their income than men on children, education, and health-care. The women as 'smart economics' discourse has only strengthened in the ensuing years and, correspondingly, the primary focus on a version of women's economic

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<sup>1</sup> BPFA recognized that women had made gains in labor force participation by 1995, and thus promoted follow on strategies, such as care work as crucial to promoting women in the economy (Para. 153; Strategic Objective F.6). BPFA also elevated concern for women in positions of power and decision-making to a distinct critical area for action (Area G).

<sup>2</sup> A woman's fallback position is assessed based on the number and quality of exit options she has from a marriage, which are believed to improve her bargaining power within the marriage. Feminist economists have shown that fallback is constituted by many elements in addition to income, including asset ownership and social norms (e.g., Agarwal, B. (1997). "Bargaining" and Gender Relations: Within and beyond the household. *Feminist Economics*, 3(1), 1–51).

empowerment that equated employed women—especially those with managerial and leadership positions—with empowered women (Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

The role of international forums such as the United Nations and frameworks like CEDAW and BPFA in fostering a liberal women’s empowerment agenda is clear. It is also clear that more than 40 years after CEDAW, this agenda is responsible for making inroads in shaping policies globally, despite the lack of nuance towards contextual factors that problematize this agenda—and its primary drive towards a ‘universalized’ shorthand of women’s empowerment that lays the foundation for modern, legitimate statecraft. We argue that two key impacts of this ‘universal’ agenda are important to consider here. First, as a result of the normative ‘universalism’ of this agenda, the international agencies tasked with agenda setting were imbued with a moral authority that continually legitimized this perspective of women’s empowerment. Second, adhering to this universalized agenda leaves little room for states to promote alternative perspectives of women’s empowerment, especially those that are not premised on neoliberal, capitalist priorities. In this section, we elaborate on both of these points.

### ***7.2.1 ‘Universalism’ and the Moral High Road***

International institutions like the United Nations established the terms for human rights and women’s empowerment and engaged these policies as universal truths. As a result, these institutions garnered moral legitimacy as agenda setters, evaluators of progress, and protectors of women. Fortified with this legitimacy, however, these institutions have rarely been called to account for their own roles in perpetuating inequalities (Abu-Lughod, 2013). For example, Gayatri Spivak (1988) exhorted the neocolonialist policies of these agendas as reverberations of past programs to ‘save brown women’ from their men, families, and institutions.

Abu-Lughod (2013, p. 81) highlights how this ‘moral crusade’ has bolstered the authority of international institutions and created a ‘new common sense’ about how aspirations for gender equality and women’s freedom are critical components of the modern lexicon of statecraft,

If the authority for this moral crusade to rescue women from other parts of the world, and usually from their cultures and traditions, depends on associating itself with the high ground of universal rights talk that has been forged in a range of international institutions, its emotional persuasiveness derives from the bedrock on which such advocates build.

In this, the modern rights doctrines, and their progenitors, have not only established a ‘virtual monopoly on the high ground of global morality’ but have pressured global activists to rewrite their claims for women’s rights and well-being in the terms set by these institutions, namely as human rights (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 82).

For Arab Gulf states, playing into this shorthand is a political necessity. For example, Kuwait, propelled to identify itself as a ‘good’ modern state and maintain the support of the international community after the Iraqi invasion, became

the first Arab Gulf country to engage in promoting this universalized concept of empowerment—via ratification of CEDAW—in 1994. Saudi Arabia followed suit in 2000, and all Arab Gulf countries had ratified CEDAW—albeit with reservations in each instance—by 2009.<sup>3</sup> Ratifications are particularly clustered in years directly following the September 11 attacks, when Arab Gulf countries were deeply scrutinized by the international community, leaving them ‘no choice but to adopt the rhetoric of social reform and substantiate it with specific gender-related initiatives aimed at demonstrating [their] commitment to emancipating women’ (Al Rasheed, 2013, p. 153), particularly through articulating gender equality as designed by the United Nations treaties (*ibid.*, p. 136).

Viewed in this way, the women's empowerment agenda serves as a powerful tool upholding what Benjamin Smith deems ‘market orientalism’ towards the Arab Gulf states. Smith (2017, p. 9) argues that such universalized agendas produce ‘imaginative geographies’ in Edward Said's (1978) sense as practices and spaces that are ‘ranked, structured, theorized, assembled, and sometimes punished in ways inseparable from earlier forums of dealing with supposedly “backward” economies and peoples.’ Smith argues that assumptions around how particular states and markets diverge from a global ideal are ‘as much “cultural” as they are “economic,”’ and are instrumental in doing ‘the work of creating positional superiority in today's economies’ despite being deeper conduits of ‘centuries of thought and practices about how to deal with others’ (Smith, 2017). In the case of the international women's empowerment agenda, this positional superiority is once again enacted in opposition to the ‘orientalist’ prerogative insofar as it maintains a singular universal approach to women's empowerment; an approach that draws specific lines between state and market and prioritizes neoliberal feminist formulations of individual responsibility and liberation through the workplace (Ennis, 2019a; Kantola & Squires, 2012; Rottenberg, 2018).

This singular approach, however, remains mired in the orientalist gaze. Abu-Lughod (2013, p. 88) argues that ‘what is constant is that Muslim women are portrayed as culturally distinct, the mirror opposites of Western women.’ Similarly, the edicts of modern statecraft position Arab Gulf states in the untenable position of promulgating legitimate policy frameworks, on the one hand, and empowering women who are conceptualized in opposition to the very women the discourse is designed to empower. This uneasy balance results in modernized policies, Al Rasheed (2013, p. 29) explains, albeit ones that must combine ‘a difficult and contradictory commitment to provide for women without seriously empowering them.’

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<sup>3</sup> Bahrain (2002), UAE (2004), Oman (2006), and Qatar (2009).

### 7.2.2 *Making Space for Women's Voices—Even When They Have Alternative Goals*

Within the international gender agenda, the discourse—however universal it is made out to be—does not capture the voices of many women on the ground. In the case of Saudi Arabia, for example, Al Rasheed (2013, p. 137) details how Arab women conceptualize empowerment under very different terms than those posed by the international human rights system. Saudi women, she explains ‘do not call for gender equality with men but for complementarity, as they see themselves contributing to society in specific ways that do not negate their identity as women.’ For Gulf women—and for the Gulf states, as will be further detailed below—it is the family that takes center stage in terms of the litmus test of well-being within the society.

This disconnect between these disparate avenues towards empowerment leaves Arab Gulf states as uneasy interlocutors of economic empowerment, strung as they are between the international demands of modern, inclusive statecraft and the local, contextual demands of their citizens. Despite the undeniable impacts of Islam and societal patriarchy in shaping Arab Gulf women's experiences, empowerment is largely drawn by the state, its policies, and overall political and economic stability (Haghighat, 2013). Therefore, the efficacy of the international agenda for women's empowerment in establishing powerful incentives to align policy contexts with indexes of progress descended from CEDAW and BPFA (e.g., the United Nations Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] and Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs]),<sup>4</sup> is intimately tied up in Arab Gulf policy development (Ennis, 2019b; Metcalfe, 2011). Primary among these goals are women's labor force participation rates (MDG 3), women's representation in management and leadership positions (SDG 5.5), and the time devoted by women towards unpaid care and domestic responsibilities (SGD 5.4).

Under these universal and decontextualized terms, Arab Gulf states continually fall short. While Gulf states have included women's development in their national policies and made progress in education and employment indicators, they are still in the beginning stages of establishing human rights systems and public policy systems with clear gender-based agendas (Metcalfe, 2011) that are critical to ‘performing’ women's empowerment. Indeed, researchers suggest that the grassroots level, not the state, makes more progress with women in the Gulf countries precisely because of their capacity to employ a more contextualized and palatable presentation of women's empowerment (Metcalfe, 2008, 2011).

This section has highlighted how more than four decades of women's empowerment processes have been influenced by a singular international women's empowerment framework that itself was a result of political negotiations. This is not a new or wild finding, but a necessary bargain to visibilize women in political, economic,

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<sup>4</sup> The Millennium Development Goal (2000–2015) three on gender equality emphasized women's representation in wage employment, along with education and political participation. The SDGs (2015–2030) inherited the work left by the MDGs, and sought to address weaknesses in the MDGs, such as through having a specific monitoring and data collection component.

and social processes. However, the normative nature of this agenda is all too often presented as a universally true edict rather than a subjective (largely acceptable to neoliberal, capitalist, and political actors) selection of the necessary and sufficient components of empowerment. Importantly, despite the universal power of this agenda, many viewpoints and priorities for women—who often have alternative visions for their own empowered futures—have been, and continue to be, subordinated and ignored. Importantly, the politically negotiated women's empowerment agenda has been ascribed with the power to impart universal normative prescriptions that can, in effect, delegitimize just these alternative perspectives: these women are merely subjects of a patriarchal, traditional, religious, backward culture, and/or state. In the next section, we present the Arab Gulf right's frameworks and highlight how contextualized nuance of women's empowerment represents itself in different policy formats.

### **7.3 The Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment in the Arab Gulf**

The previous section established the competing logic that comprises the policy frameworks in the Arab Gulf states, primarily the imbalance between the standards set by the international community and the values and priorities of the local populations. The extent to which public policies in the Arab Gulf countries can and will empower women is determined—and assessed—by these disparate stakeholders. In this section, we offer a comparison of the policy frameworks offered by Arab Gulf states by analyzing constitutions, national vision and development plans, and national legal frameworks for women's employment. Such a comparison allows for the identification of any differences in terms of the position of and policy approaches towards women in each of the six countries, including how women are envisioned in forward-looking policies.

#### **7.3.1 Arab Gulf Constitutions**

Exhibit 7.1 presents a snapshot of the constitutional provisions related to citizen employment, gender equality, and the family unit. Overall, the constitutions show that work—especially in the public sector—is not only encouraged but is entrenched as a fundamental 'right' for all citizens. All six Arab Gulf constitutions state that citizens have rights to employment and economic life. Bahrain's provision stands out in not only prohibiting gender discrimination, but explicitly codifying women's rights not only to work but to institutional supports that contribute to establishing a clear reconciliation of economic and household duties.

Country	Employment	Gender equality	Family Unit
Bahrain	16b. Citizens are equal in the assumption of public posts in accordance with the conditions specified by law.	5b. The State guarantees reconciling with their work in society, and their equality with men in political, social, cultural, and economic spheres without breaching the provisions of Islamic Canon Law.	5a. The family is the cornerstone of society, deriving its strength from religion, morality and patriotism. The law preserves its lawful entity, and children, tends the young and protects them from exploitation and citizens are equal before the law in safeguarding them against moral, bodily public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination among them on the basis of sex, origin, language, religion, or creed.
Kuwait	41. Every Kuwaiti shall have the right to work and to choose the nature of dignity and his occupation. Work is the duty of every citizen. Dignity requires it and the State shall make work available to citizens and shall see to the equity of its conditions.	29. The people are peers in human rights, equal public rights and obligations. There shall be no differentiation among them because of gender, origin, language or religion.	9. The family is the foundation of society; its mainstays are religion, morals and the love of country. The Law shall preserve its entity, strengthen its bonds and shall, under its aegis, protect mothers and infants.
Oman	12. Citizens are considered equal in taking up public employment in accordance with the provisions stipulated by the Law.	17. All Citizens are equal before the Law and share the same public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination amongst them on the ground of gender, origin, color, and language, religion, sect, domicile, and social status.	12. The family is the basis of the society, and the Law regulates its development, protecting it, preserving its ties, strengthening its members and values, safeguarding its conditions to develop their potential and capabilities
Qatar	34. Citizens shall be equal in terms of public rights and duties.	35. All persons are equal before the Law and there shall be no discrimination whatsoever on ground of gender, race, language or religion.	21. The family is the basis of society. A Qatari family is founded on religion, ethics and patriotism. The Law shall regulate as necessary to protect the family, support its structure, strengthen its ties and protect mothers, children and the elderly.
Saudi Arabia	28. The State shall provide job opportunities to all able-bodied people and shall enact laws to protect both the employee and the employer.	N/A	9. The family is the nucleus of Saudi society. Its members shall be brought up imbued with the Islamic Creed which calls for obedience to God, His Messenger and those of the nation who are charged with authority; for the respect and enforcement of law and order; and for love of the motherland and taking pride in its glorious history.
UAE	20. Society shall esteem work as a fundamental basis of its development. It shall strive to ensure that work is available for citizens and to ensure that they are prepared for it. It shall take such steps as are necessary to ensure this by providing legislation to protect the rights of the employees and to protect the interests of the employers, bearing in mind developing international labour legislation.	N/A	15. The family shall be the basis of society. Its support shall be religion, ethics and patriotism. The law shall guarantee its existence and shall safeguard it and protect it from corruption.

Source: The Constitute Project ([link](https://www.constituteproject.org/countries?lang=en)).

**Exhibit 7.1** Articles in Arab Gulf constitutions focusing on employment, gender equality, and the importance of the family unit (Source The Constitute Project <https://www.constituteproject.org/countries?lang=en>)



In a series of statements that are nearly identical, gender discrimination is prohibited by Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. Gender discrimination is not recognized or protected in the constitutions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In all six constitutions, however, it is the family that is at the center of public life whether as the 'basis,' the 'cornerstone,' the 'foundation,' or the 'nucleus' of society. In all cases, this provision supersedes the mention of gender equality in terms of the order in which the topics appear in the constitutional provisions. Such an emphasis on the family unit has a specific impact on forming not only key policy frameworks for women in the workplace but also highlights the local spaces for women's empowerment that simultaneously reflect and reinforce the contextual values for women's roles.<sup>5</sup>

### ***7.3.2 Arab Gulf State National Visions and Development Planning***

Long before the release of the United Nation's Agenda 2030 in 2015, Arab Gulf states were establishing their own 'vision' planning processes. Such processes were largely sparked by the need to reorganize economies that relied too heavily on oil revenues and to establish economic diversification goals. Oman first released its 'Oman Vision 2020' program in 1995, followed by Bahrain (The Economic Vision 2030) and Qatar (Qatar National Vision 2030) in 2008 (Koch, 2017). Kuwait and United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed suit in 2010, and Saudi Arabia released its 'Vision 2030' strategy in 2016. This first wave of national vision documents emphasized comprehensive, broad-based reforms yet established few specific or measurable action plans which led to limited results.

Exhibit 7.2 illustrates the great discrepancy in the treatment of gender issues in these documents. Women's inclusion in these goals range from no mention of gender goals (Bahrain) to a broad nod to the international agenda (Kuwait) to inclusion as one among multiple venerable groups (Oman) all of the way to specific, meaningful and measurable goals related to women's empowerment (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE).

This range of policy focus is further highlighted in the National Development Plans, which provide evidence of the effort to align international policy priorities with local and context-specific needs (as shown in Exhibit 7.3). For instance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality (SDG 5) is clearly and broadly mentioned in the development plans of Kuwait and Oman, but without any information on how it will be implemented at a local level or what specific areas will be focused on. This lack of detail or specific goals for the local population suggests that the inclusion of this goal in the development plans may be more of a formality

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<sup>5</sup> In this way, such policy frameworks act as technologies of gender as described by Teresa de Lauretis whereby institutions have 'the power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and "implant" representations of gender.' See de Lauretis, T. (1987). *Technologies of Gender*. Indiana University Press.

Country	National Vision	Objectives related to female empowerment
Bahrain	Bahrain Economic Vision 2030	• <i>Not specified</i>
Kuwait	New Kuwait Vision 2035	• “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” by implementing UN SDG 5
Oman	Oman Vision 2040	• “A cohesive and vigilant society that is socially and economically empowered, especially women, children, the youth, the persons with disabilities and the most vulnerable groups”
Qatar	Qatar National Vision 2030	• “Enhance women’s capacities and empower them to participate fully in the political and economic spheres, especially in decision-making roles” • “Increased opportunities and vocational support for Qatari women”
Saudi Arabia	Saudi Vision 2030	• Aims to provide jobs for around 1 million Saudi Arabian women to increase women’s labor force participation
UAE	Vision 2021	• Aims to become one of the world’s top 25 countries achieving gender equality

**Exhibit 7.2** Objectives in Arab Gulf National Vision Plans focusing on female empowerment

to meet international standards, rather than a fully integrated and committed plan to empower women.

Bahrain and the UAE offer more comprehensive discussions of women’s needs, opportunities, and support systems, but they position these needs within the context of the family and institutions rather than focusing on specific outcomes for women. In contrast, the strategies of Qatar and Saudi Arabia are notable for their specific focus on critical issues such as increasing the number of women in leadership roles, combating negative stereotypes, and promoting women in the workplace.

It is also worth mentioning that work-life balance is explicitly addressed as a goal of state policies, particularly in Bahrain and Qatar. On one hand, these policies reinforce the strong cultural emphasis on family life and women’s roles in the household. On the other hand, in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, where many nations are struggling to support working families, these policies create a clear foundation for addressing the overrepresentation of women in unpaid care responsibilities (in line with SDG 5) and for creating a policy environment that supports women’s economic agency.

Country	National Plan	Objectives related to female empowerment
Bahrain	National Plans for the Advancement of Bahraini Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Seeks to ensure the achievement of family stability and to enable it to meet the requirements to contribute to competitiveness in development, based on the principle of equal opportunities, and the integration of women's needs into development, in order to achieve opportunities for them to excel and improve their choices for the quality of their lives and their lifelong learning, through integration with partners and allies in institutional work, so that Bahrain becomes a regional center specialized in women's issues' (<i>Supreme Council for Women - Supreme Council for Women: Two decades of successful empowerment of worthy partners in nation building</i>, 2021)</li> </ul>
Kuwait	Kuwait National Development Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Has a component and budget for gender development, with a focus on SDG5 on gender equality and women's empowerment' (<i>Working to achieve SDG 5 in Kuwait</i>, 2018)</li> </ul>
Oman	Five Year Development Plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrated the UN SDG5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, into the main pillars of its Five-Year Development Plan (<i>Sustainable Development</i>, 2020)</li> </ul>
Qatar	National Development Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions, while reducing stereotyping of women's roles and responsibilities...ensuring the individual well-being of all Qataris, whether through increased career opportunities for women or through stronger occupational safety standards'</li> <li>• 'The government will improve support for working families, particularly for women, by expanding childcare facilities and family-friendly employment practices and by encouraging gender-sensitive working environments.'</li> <li>• 'developing the capacities of Qataris, especially highly-educated women'</li> </ul>
Saudi Arabia	National Strategy for Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expanding the employment of Saudi women who want to work by establishing female employment units in labor offices and the Saudi Human Resources Development Fund, encouraging remote work, creating a program to qualify female job applicants, and identifying which jobs can be filled by Saudi women (<i>National Strategy for Employment</i>)</li> </ul>
UAE	National Strategy for Empowerment of Emirati Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Aims to provide a framework for all federal and local government entities, private sector, as well as social organizations, to set plans that will provide a decent living for women and make them creative in all sustainable and developmental fields' (<i>National Strategy for Empowerment of Emirati Women</i>, 2021)</li> </ul>

**Exhibit 7.3** Objectives in Arab Gulf National Plans focusing on female empowerment

### 7.3.3 Labor Laws, Family Law, and Women's Employment

So far, we have introduced the treatment of women's empowerment concepts in the constitutions and future-oriented national vision and development plans. However, it's important to recognize that in Arab Gulf states, there is a disconnect between

international goals and local priorities with regard to public policy, which affects women specifically.

### 7.3.3.1 Equality for Citizen Women's Employment

In addition to the constitutional provisions, various labor laws in the Arab Gulf address equal work rights and the issues of discrimination. Five of the six Arab Gulf states have labor laws that commit to nondiscrimination in the workplace. Direct text on equal work rights or the prohibition of discrimination was not found in Kuwait's labor laws.

- Qatar's 2004 Labor Law No. 14 states that men and women should have equal working rights in terms of job opportunities and equal wages.
- Article 39 of Bahrain's Private Sector Labour Law states that 'discrimination in wages based on sex, origin, language, religion or ideology shall be prohibited.'
- Article 80 of Oman's Labour Law (which applies to both citizens and expatriates in both the public and private sectors) states that 'all provisions regulating the employment of workers shall be applicable to women workers without discrimination between them in the same work.'
- Article 3 in Saudi Arabia's Human Resources law states that 'All citizens have equal rights to work without discrimination based on gender, disability, age or any other form of discrimination, whether during work or hiring process, or when the position is advertised.'
- Article 4 of the UAE's Labour Law states that any discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, religion, national or social origin or disability which would have the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity, or prejudicing equal treatment in the employment, the maintenance of a job and the enjoyment of its benefits, is prohibited.

The World Bank Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) index reports the legal equality of women in 190 economies around the world. In Exhibit 7.4, the WBL assessment highlights that the policy space for women remains more complex and variable across the six countries. Namely, despite broad constitutional guarantees of nondiscrimination in labor law provisions, family law policies continue to enact clear gender boundaries. For example, legal provisions that mandate women's obedience to their husband—often indicative of needing the husband's permission and approval to engage in employment—are directly linked to women's equality of access to the workplace. In addition, policies in many Arab Gulf states set the terms under which women are allowed to work, such as denying work late at night and refusing women entry into jobs considered hazardous or dangerous to their health (e.g., Oman Labor Law Art. 81–82). As is discussed later in this section, such policies reflect the constitutional emphasis on the health and stability of the family unit and ensure the availability and protection of the woman for her familial roles. Rather than being seen as limiting to an individual woman's employment options, however, such policies

are seen as a guarantee that the family unit is sufficiently supported throughout her employment.

Legal provisions that distinguish women's employment, however, are not all limiting. For example, women's work-life balance is also clearly valued through pension provisions. In Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar, pension policies set differential requirements for men and women; largely these policies allow women to retire at younger ages than men and with fewer total years of work. In Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar women can access full pension benefits five years earlier than men if they meet tenure requirements of 10–20 years of service. These provisions are

Country	Provision	Documentation
<b>Can a woman get a job in the same way as a man?</b>		
Bahrain	No	Family Law No. 19/2017 Art. 56
Kuwait	No	Personal Status Law Art. 89
Oman	Yes	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Qatar	No	Family Law Art. 69(5)
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Guidelines for employment in the private sector
United Arab Emirates	Yes	Personal Status Law 28/2005 amended by Federal Decree 5/2020 Art 72
<b>Is there no legal provision that requires a woman to obey her husband</b>		
Bahrain	No	Family Law No. 19/2017 Art 40(a)
Kuwait	No	Personal Status Law Art 87
Oman	Yes	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Qatar	No	Family Law Art 58 and 69
Saudi Arabia	Yes	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
United Arab Emirates	Yes	Personal Status Law 28/2005 amended by Federal Decree 5/2020 Art 56
<b>Does the law prohibit discrimination in employment based on gender?</b>		
Bahrain	Yes	Labor Law, Art 29
Kuwait	Yes	Ministerial Decree No. 177 of 2021 on Prohibiting Discrimination in Employment and Prohibiting Sexual Harassment at Workplaces Art 1
Oman	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Qatar	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Labor Law, Art 3
United Arab Emirates	Yes	Federal Law No. 11 of 2019 amending certain provisions of Federal Law No. 2 of 2015, on Combating Discrimination and Hatred

**Exhibit 7.4** Women's equality under Arab Gulf States legal frameworks (*Source* World Bank 'Women, Business and the Law' [2022]; \*\*This law was not included in the WBL report)

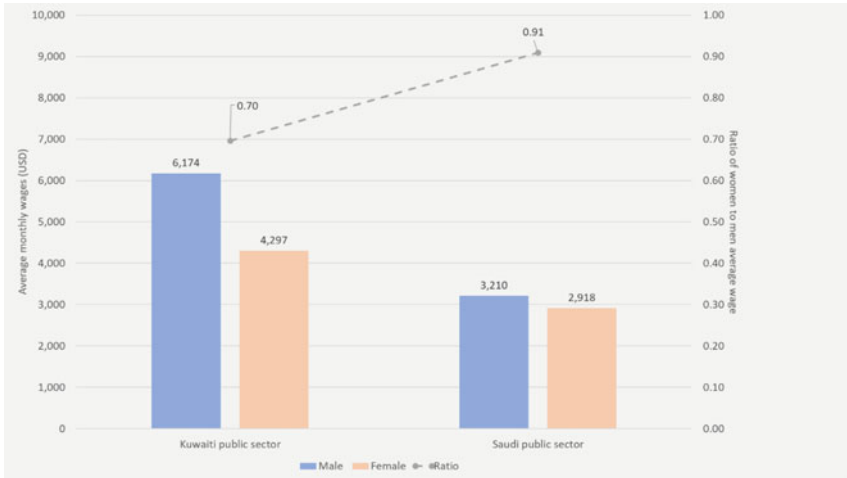
<b>Is the age at which men and women can retire with full pension benefits the same?</b>		
Bahrain	No	Social Insurance Law Art. 34
Kuwait	No	Social Insurance Law 1976, Art. 17(6); Law No. 10 of 2019
Oman	No	Social Insurance Law, Art. 21-2
Qatar	No	** Retirement and Pension Law No. 24 of 2002, replaced by Social Insurance Law No. 1 of 2022.
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Social Insurance Law Art. 38 (1)
UAE	Yes	Law No. 7 of 1999, Arts 1 and 16
<b>Does the law mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value?</b>		
Bahrain	Yes	Labor Law, Art 39; Decree Law No, 16/2021
Kuwait	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Oman	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Qatar	No	<i>No relevant policy identified</i>
Saudi Arabia	Yes	Decree No. 215739/1440
UAE	Yes	Federal Decree Law No. 6 of 2020 Art. 1

**Exhibit 7.4** (continued)

widely accepted as recognition of women's dual roles in the workplace and in the household, both of which are of service to the state and the community. In addition, half of the Arab Gulf countries (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) have policy provisions that explicitly protect women's pensions by accounting for periods of absence due to childcare. Given the high proportion of public sector employment among citizens, and especially women, these policies signify a direct set of entitlements in the form of work-life reconciliation policies for women in employment.

### **7.3.3.2 Gender Wage Gaps Persist Despite Policy Framework for Equality**

All Arab Gulf states have extremely imbalanced workforces (to be discussed in greater detail in the next section). Migrant workers have minimum wage thresholds, often set through negotiations between the home country and the country of employment. According to Exhibit 7.4 above, only Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have legal provisions for equal pay. Notably, the World Bank report does not cite Article 51, Law No. 6 of 2010 of Kuwait labor law which provides that 'in terms of performance of the same type of work women are paid same rates as men.' Perhaps this law does not meet the standards set by the research teams or perhaps there is lax implantation which explains the high gender wage gaps in the country. Estimates set



**Exhibit 7.5** Gender wage gap for nationals in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Q4 2020. Values are in US dollars (Source Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS] and Saudi General Authority for Statistics)

the gender wage gap in Kuwait at 41 percent in the public sector: in the first quarter of 2019 average monthly salary for Kuwaiti men was 1,807 compared to KWD 1,279 for Kuwaiti women.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the wage gap is less for non-Kuwaiti workers in the public sector, where men earn only 9 percent more than women on average (KWD 726 vs. 666).<sup>7</sup> As shown in Exhibit 7.5, citizen women in Saudi Arabia have almost closed the gender wage gap, perhaps a change attributable to equal pay legislation. Similarly, women in the public sector in Bahrain make only 3 percent less than men on average (BD 781 for men and BD 758 for women; Lukova 2021 citing Belfer, M (2018) ‘Fighting the Gender Wage Gap: The Bahrain experience’).

Despite the widespread global efforts to attend to and challenge gender wage gaps, there is much evidence, however, to show that this is not the only story being told in the Arab Gulf. To continue with the previous example, the wage gap in the Kuwaiti private sector is inverted, with non-Kuwaiti women earning 42.7 percent higher salaries than their male counterparts (KWD 387 vs KWD 271). It is important to note that none of these figures includes domestic workers, who have a minimum income set at KWD 60 per month, which would greatly deflate the statistics. As indicated in Exhibit 7.4, Qatar has no legal wage protections. However, in this case, the absence of a legal mandate has allowed women (foreign and citizen) to outearn their male colleagues. Data from 2022 shows that the average monthly wage for

<sup>6</sup> Kuwait Central Statistics Bureau. (2019) *Statistics for 2019*. Gender gaps persist in the private sector of Kuwait as well; however, they are not reflected here as the government has instituted a ‘top-up’ program whereby they subsidize salaries for citizens in the private sector. Therefore, the data would not be useful for a full rendering of wage gaps.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

women in Qatar in the second quarter of 2022 was QR 11,990 compared with QR 11,642 for males.<sup>8</sup>

### 7.3.3.3 Night Duties and Hazardous Work

As introduced above, policy frameworks in the Arab Gulf states often restrict women's access to night duties and hazardous work. In addition to the Omari Labor Law cited previously, similar provisions exist in most Arab Gulf states:

- Bahrain's Human Resource Law specifically outlines that female employees 'shall not be entrusted to work in a government industrial project between 8 PM to 7 AM' ('Decision No. 51/2012 Promulgating the Executive Regulations of Civil Service Law issued by Decree Law No 48/2010,' 2012).
- Kuwait has a similar policy against women working at night—with an exception for women in the health sector—as specified in Law 38/1964 (Alansari, 2018).
- In the UAE's Law, under Title Two, Employment of Workers and Youth and Women Labor, Chapter 3: Women Labor, Article 27 states that 'Women may not be employed at night. The word "night" shall mean a period of eleven consecutive hours at least including the period from 10 p.m. until 7 a.m.' Article 28 following this article specifies some cases exempt from this law such as women in health services.
- According to Qatar's Law No. 14 (2004), Article 94, 'Women shall not be employed in dangerous arduous works, works detrimental to their health, morals or other works to be specified by a Decision of the Minister.'

In contrast, as part of sweeping reforms to Saudi Arabia recently removed the prohibition on women 'from working at night and working in hazardous jobs and industries' to enhance female employment in the private sector (Matthews-Taylor et al., 2020). One result of such changes is the increasing presence of women in the security sector. In February 2021, Saudi Arabia opened posts for women in the military and in 2022 women were allowed to register to join the Border Guard services and other military departments.<sup>9</sup> Kuwait's more contentious transition in 2022 allowed women to take combat roles but required that they wear a head covering and have the permission of a male guardian.<sup>10</sup>

Such conflict highlights the balancing act that Arab Gulf policy frameworks play between appeasing and embracing international standards (in the case of Saudi Arabia) and actively resisting such change (in the case of Kuwait). Lawmakers across the region face harsh reactions from sizeable factions of their populations who want

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/statistics/Statistical%20Releases/Social/LaborForce/2022/LF\\_Q2\\_2022\\_AE.pdf](https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/statistics/Statistical%20Releases/Social/LaborForce/2022/LF_Q2_2022_AE.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/saudi-arabia/2022/03/25/saudi-arabia-allows-women-to-join-its-border-guards/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/kuwaiti-army-allows-women-in-combat-roles-but-without-guns>.



to embrace women's familial roles and who do not demand neoliberal individual equality in every arena to feel empowered. The use of proxies such as 'women's work at night' and 'women's work in hazardous jobs' are not relevant indicators of empowerment, nor is their access necessarily a signal of equality, empowerment, or well-being.

This section has examined the Arab Gulf policy frameworks at multiple levels to highlight the tenuous, and often resistant, interactions of international women's agendas with a more nuanced and contextualized empowerment. In the case of women's economic empowerment in particular the emphasis on neoliberal individuality is at odds with the family-centric environment of the Arab Gulf. Where international agendas seem to envision progress in 'freeing' women from their family roles—or at least ensuring they do not cost her economic opportunities, Arab Gulf policies embrace women's family and economic roles in ways that don't easily fit these models. Such policy frameworks may indeed find fertile ground in the post-COVID era when women's multiple roles have been pushed to the brink, as exemplified by the recent 'Great Resignation' and 'Great Break-Up' movements (McKinsey, 2022). In such an environment, there is a need to revisit the assumptions on which women's economic empowerment has been built and disseminated, particularly those that disarticulate agentic voices that do not accept neoliberal concepts of blunt, unquestioned equality and workforce participation as automatic purveyors of empowerment. In the next section, we provide an in-depth analysis of the contextual nuances in the Arab Gulf and their implications for international women's empowerment discourses.

## 7.4 Contextualizing Women's Empowerment in the Arab Gulf

In this section, we highlight women's economic empowerment in the Arab Gulf through analysis of two main themes—labor force participation and work-life reconciliation. We show that the unique context for women's labor force participation in the Arab Gulf—notably the dominance of male, foreign workers in the labor force and the high concentration of citizen employment in the public sector—provide challenges to Arab Gulf states in implementing international agendas. These challenges are not well captured in global metrics of labor force participation or care work and as such cannot fully represent the situation of citizen women in these countries.

To properly situate this analysis, a short accounting of the distinctions between the Arab Gulf rentier economies and their labor forces is warranted. First, research shows that women's labor force participation is lower in resource-rich autocracies than in other wealthy countries (e.g., Liou & Musgrave, 2016) and that the development of industries that are oil adjacent are unfriendly towards women's employment (e.g., Ross, 2008). Oil-rich rentier economies, the research explains, had resource wealth that allowed for the importation of foreign male labor and reduced the need for citizen women to enter the labor force (Al Rasheed, 2013; Hijab, 1988; Moghadam,

2005; Ross, 2008). In addition, citizen families could easily subsist with one income (Hijab, 1988).

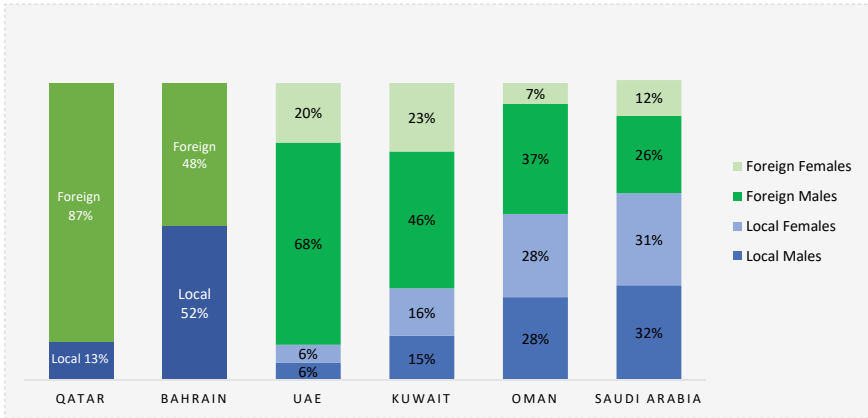
Second, a deep dependence on migrant labor has shaped the national labor markets from the early oil boom years when the countries needed to address labor and skills gaps quickly. Despite rising human capital levels in these countries, dependence on migrant labor has continued, with the resulting labor market being rigidly formed around this dependence (Buttorff et al., 2018a; Ennis, 2019b). Moreover, gender gaps in migrant labor can be traced to the Arab Gulf countries' rapidly growing infrastructure needs which demanded influxes of male foreign labor to work in massive construction projects and the oil industry—historically and globally, both industries typically hire men over women. As a result, citizens, and especially citizen women, are highly clustered in public sector employment creating a deeply imbalanced workforce that is not fully captured in global measurement tools. These defining characteristics of the Arab State workforces are not fully accounted for in international data sets and result in data that cannot represent women's full participation in these countries.

Third, we provide a critical rendering of the public policy frameworks around women's economic empowerment. In opposition to the challenges discussed above, we show how the policy environment for working women in the Arab Gulf and their explicit support for women's dual roles in workplace and the home are more enabling for women than in other countries. In fact, the overall work-life reconciliation policy framework in the Arab Gulf is notable for its allowances for not just maternity, but also for prolonged illness, educational opportunities, and political participation. As such, these frameworks illustrate a much broader acknowledgment of work-life reconciliation needs that go beyond care work. While such explicit valuation of women's family roles—or even of a worker's multiple engagements outside of the workplace—does not easily align with the neoliberal policy agendas, it is a notable accomplishment in ensuring work-life reconciliation for all workers.

### ***7.4.1 Arab Gulf Women in the Labor Force***

The promotion of women's labor force participation rates as a key signifier of women's (economic) empowerment is a central metric of the international rights agendas. As illustrated in this chapter, this agenda is muddled by the proportion of migrant workers in the Arab Gulf labor forces and the inability of international measurement tools to accurately capture citizen women's labor force participation rates in the Arab Gulf countries.

The universal measure of women's economic engagement—through accounting for the female labor force participation rate (FLFP) as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO)—does not fully reflect the large—and male-migrant worker populations and large public sectors of the Arab Gulf (Buttorff et al., 2018a, b). The ILO statistical indicators intend to measure the proportion of the working-age population in a country that is engaged in the labor market -either as employed or



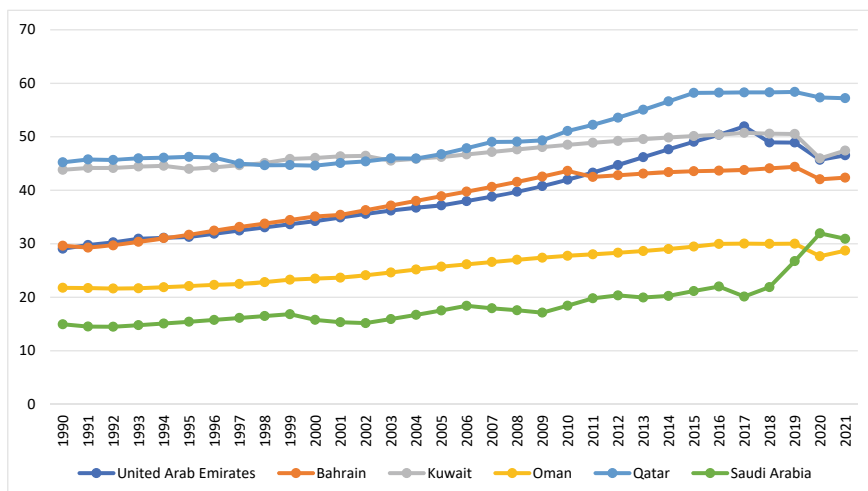
**Exhibit 7.6** Demographic composition of Arab Gulf countries (Qatar and UAE, 2010; Bahrain 2014; Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia, 2018) (Source Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], and Saudi General Statistics Authority. Estimates for Qatar: Winckler, O. [2015]. How many Qatari nationals are there? *Middle East Quarterly*. Estimates for UAE: <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/fact-sheet>. Estimates for Bahrain: Aref, A. [2019]. Demographic Dynamics and the Question of Sustainability: Abiding Policy Debate in the GCC. Doha Institute for Family Studies, and European University Institute—Migration Policy Center and Gulf Research Center [2016]. Gulf Labor Markets and Migration [GLMM] Demographic and Economic Database)

unemployed persons.<sup>11</sup> As this definition makes no allowance for the nationality of the workers—citizen or migrant—the migrant-heavy workforces of the Arab Gulf are largely misrepresented in the data. Research suggests that this oversight leads to the underestimation of citizen women’s participation in the labor force by anywhere from 5 percent (Saudi Arabia) to 38 percent (Qatar) (Buttorff et al., 2018a, b).<sup>12</sup> This effect is strongest in the Arab Gulf states, however, where foreign workers comprise between 36 percent (Saudi Arabia) and 88 percent (Qatar, UAE) of the national workforce (see Exhibit 7.6). On the whole, male migrants dominate these demographic profiles; the sex-disaggregated data from Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE show that for every female migrant, there can be anywhere from three to seven male migrants.

The preponderance of non-nationals and men in the Arab State labor markets obscures the visibility of women, especially in the internationally comparable metrics that do not make distinctions between migrant and citizenship status in determining labor force eligibility. Exhibits 7.7 and 7.8 show the FLFP patterns for the Arab Gulf states since 1990, as modeled by the ILO. Exhibit 7.7 shows that the proportion of

<sup>11</sup> <https://ilostat.ilo.org/resources/concepts-and-definitions/description-labour-force-statistics/>.

<sup>12</sup> The findings were relevant to other regions as well. The adjusted statistics increased women’s labor force participation statistics in the US and Sweden by over 10 percent, while other Middle East countries saw small downward adjustments (e.g., Morocco).



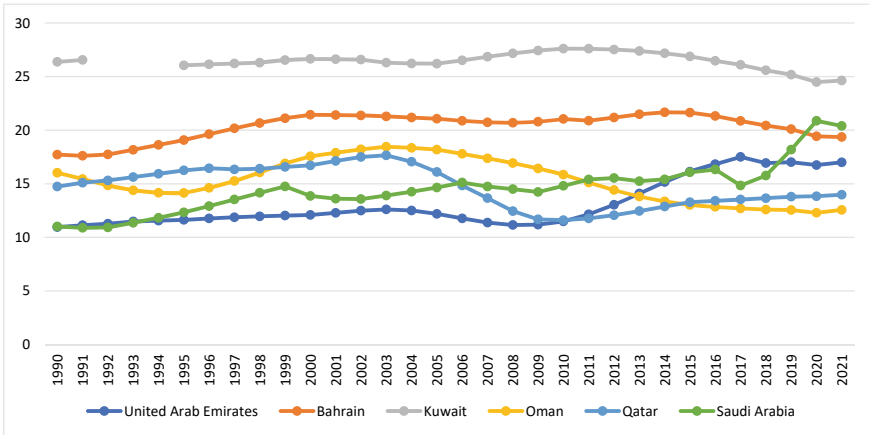
**Exhibit 7.7** Female labor force participation rate as a percentage of the female population ages 15+ (Source World Bank Data Bank, modeled ILO estimate, Assessed December 6, 2022)

women—migrant and citizen—in each country who participate in the labor force—employed or unemployed—was relatively stable from 1990 to 2010, but that in the past 10 years, participation rates have been trending upwards, particularly in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In fact, as of 2021, the FLFP rates of women in Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE were above the world average of 46 percent, with Qatar outperforming the United States (55 percent) and the European Union (51 percent).<sup>13</sup> Exhibit 7.8 shows that despite these upward trends, the size of the female labor force remains small, measuring between 12 and 15 percent of the total labor force across the region. This confirms the overwhelming male dominance in the labor force in these countries in addition to highlighting the active participation of women.

The ILO data above, however, includes all working women—migrant and citizen—which again perpetuates a misrepresentation of the employment of citizen women. This is particularly true when considering the heavy reliance of the Arab Gulf states on domestic workers. ILO data suggests that domestic workers are a major proportion of the labor force, reaching, for example, 12 percent of the labor force in Saudi Arabia and 14 percent in Kuwait (ILO, 2018). Thus, nearly half of the female labor force represented in Exhibit 7.8 for each of these countries is solely comprised of migrant domestic workers.

Exhibit 7.9 shows the employment rates of citizen women as a percentage of the citizen labor force. In Kuwait, for example, ILO statistics—by including migrant and unemployed women—underestimate Kuwaiti women’s LFPR: the ILO shows a female LFPR of 46.9 percent compared with the Kuwaiti labor market indicators which show that 58 percent of employed Kuwaitis are women. Countries with larger

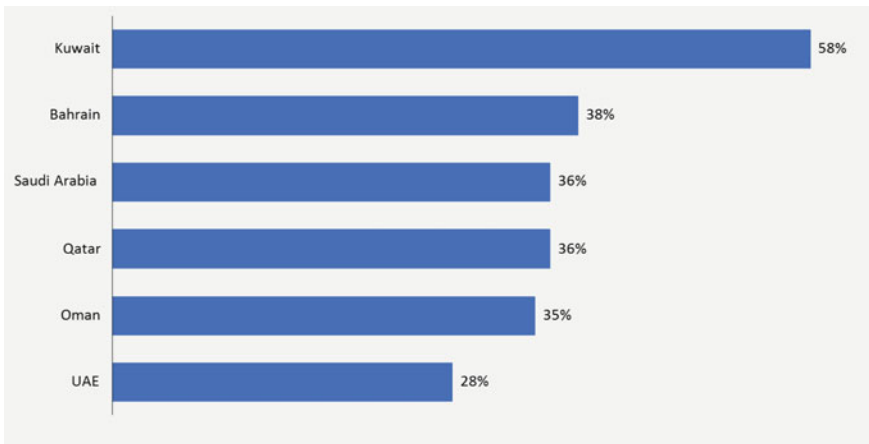
<sup>13</sup> World Bank Data Bank, Labor force participation rate, % of female population ages 15+ (modeled ILO estimate). Accessed November 22, 2022.



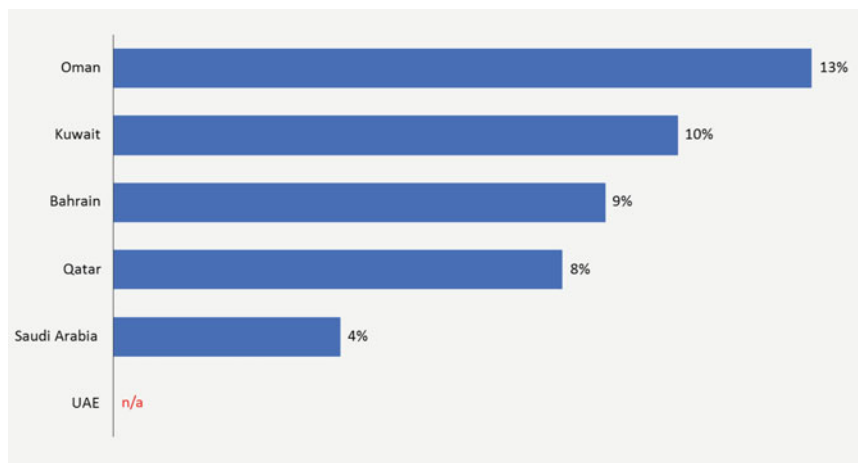
**Exhibit 7.8** Female labor force as a percentage of the total labor force (Source World Bank Data Bank, modeled ILO estimate, Accessed December 6, 2022)

shares of migrant labor face larger distortions. In Qatar, for example, the ILO’s estimate of 57 percent of women participating in the labor force primarily captures the large population of migrant women workers; national statistics estimate Qatari women’s participation at 36 percent.

It’s important to note that the high percentage of foreign women employed in the region influences the overall statistics for women in the international labor force.



**Exhibit 7.9** Citizen female employment in the Arab Gulf as a percentage of the citizen labor force, 2020 (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal. Note Figures for the UAE are estimates. Data does not include domestic workers)



**Exhibit 7.10** Foreign female employment as a percentage of the foreign labor force in the Arab Gulf, 2020 (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal. Note Data does not include domestic workers)

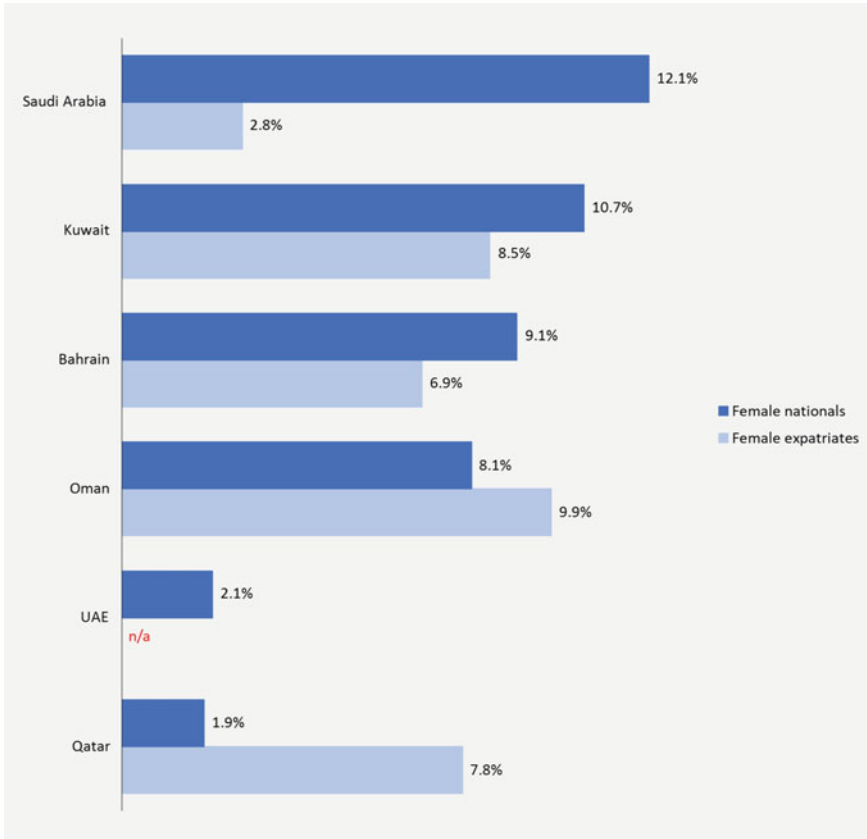
However, both citizens and foreign workers in the Arab Gulf states are predominantly male. As shown in Exhibit 7.10, only 4–13% of foreign workers are female, with a strong male dominance in the foreign labor force. It’s important to mention that these numbers do not include domestic workers (in distinction from the ILO statistics).

As labor force statistics include both employed and unemployed persons, it is important to further establish the presence of women in employment, not just in the labor force. Exhibit 7.11 illustrates total female employment in the Arab Gulf by citizenship, showing that Saudi Arabia has the largest share of female national employment (12.1 percent), while Qatar has the smallest (1.9 percent).

The evidence shows that not only have Arab Gulf women been entering the workforce, but that they have been doing so on relatively positive terms. Arab Gulf women have effectively ‘leapfrogged’ the jobs in low-paying and low-skilled manufacturing industries typical of the workforces in North Africa and the Levant, to find employment in high-level services sector professions (Buttorff et al., 2018a; 2018b). This, along with the higher levels of women’s labor force participation,<sup>14</sup> results in higher levels of female citizen labor force in the Arab Gulf that is rarely depicted in the broader literature on Arab women’s empowerment.

The flip side of women’s labor force participation is women’s unemployment. In the case of the Arab Gulf states, unemployment rates, such as those shown in Exhibit 7.12, largely capture unemployment among citizens, as migrant workers have extremely limited rights outside of their sponsored, employment-dependent

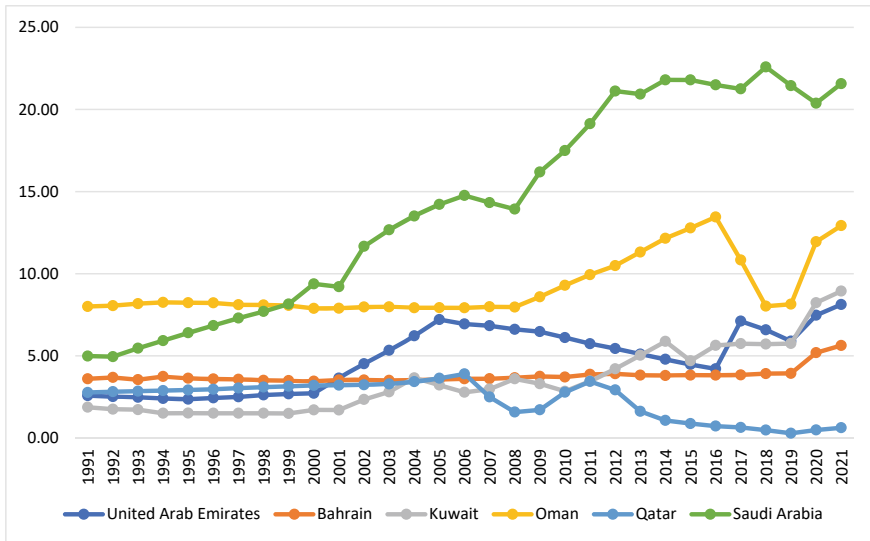
<sup>14</sup> The regional average female labor force participation rate statistics across MENA is 21.3 percent, an average that is lower than that found in any one of the Arab Gulf states.



**Exhibit 7.11** Breakdown of female employment as a % of total employment in the Arab Gulf by citizenship, 2020. Listed in descending order of female national employment (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA] [35], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS] [36], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI] [37], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA] [38], Saudi General Statistics Authority [39], and the UAE Government portal [40]. Note Figures for the UAE are estimates, and data does not include domestic workers)

visas. This means that when the work ends, the migrant worker also loses their visa to be in the country. The ILO data shows that women in four out of six Arab Gulf states have unemployment rates that exceed world averages indicating that there are women ready to work in these countries (Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and UAE). The issue is extremely acute in Oman and Saudi Arabia, where women experience unemployment at more than two (in the case of Oman) or three (Saudi Arabia) times the world average.

Saudi Arabia has the highest female unemployment rate (23 percent), and Qatar has the lowest (0.3 percent) as of 2021. It is not surprising that Qatar registers such low unemployment rates. It is one of the richest Arab Gulf countries with a small population of 2.8 million people as of 2020. It is also a rapidly growing economy



**Exhibit 7.12** Unemployment, percent of the female labor force (modeled ILO estimate) (Source World Bank Data Bank, Accessed December 3, 2022)

where nationals receive high salaries and foreigners only enter with work visas. Low-income foreign workers are not allowed to bring in dependents. In most cases, national and foreign women with employed spouses are not in dire financial need to work. Saudi Arabia is a much older migrant-receiving economy and has a much larger population representing diverse socioeconomic strata. In light of rapid policy changes in Saudi Arabia and the growing female labor force participation rate (as shown in Exhibit 7.7) in recent years, the increasing unemployment rate for women may also be capturing women's increasing desire to work and the remaining friction in access to the labor market.

This section has taken the case of female labor force participation metrics and detailed the limitations in analysis that result from the lack of specification for the Arab Gulf economic and labor market circumstances. Specifically, the male- and migrant-dominated labor force means that the interpretation of FLFP statistics, particularly to assess the status of citizen women, is insufficient. As detailed above, citizen women are engaging in the labor force at rates that rival—or exceed—many Western nations. In addition, the quality of the employment accessed by Arab Gulf women is high indicating that circumstances for women's empowerment in the region may be higher than reflected in international comparisons. In the next section, we examine a second labor force imbalance that is central to the Arab Gulf economies—the strong preference of citizen workers—particularly women—for public sector employment.



### 7.4.2 *Imbalanced Workforces and Public Sector Employment*

In this section, we analyze the gender impacts of public sector human resource policies that build incentives for national workers by giving them priority of appointment in the public sector and permanent contracts that are not available to foreign workers. These policies are implicated as one cause of the imbalance in the workforce with nationals overrepresented in the public sector and foreign workers in the private sector.

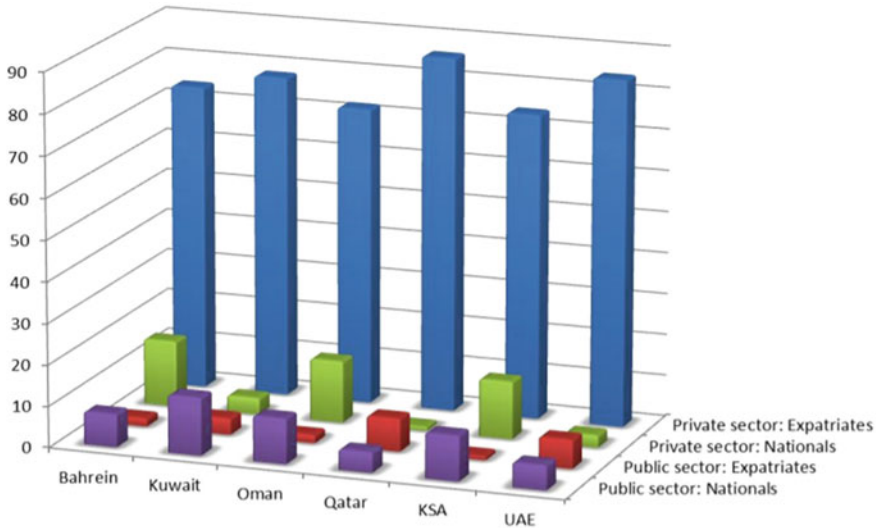
Research suggests that public sector employment has provided a key opportunity to women globally who sought to escape many of the discriminatory work environments in the private sector (Iversen & Rosenbluth, 2010). Globally, women comprise a larger proportion of public sector workforces (46 percent) than private sector workforces (33 percent). Among OECD countries, public sector employment varies widely: government employment can reach upwards of 30 percent of total employment (e.g., Norway) and lows of 6 or 8 percent (in Japan and Korea, respectively) (OECD, 2021).

Across all Arab Gulf countries, citizens have a strong preference for public sector employment (Ennis, 2019a, 2019b). Simply, the constitutional guarantees of employment presented earlier ensure that public sector employment is secure while generous state provisions provide better work terms for citizens than the private sector (see Exhibit 7.13). The demographic imbalance and national sensitivities towards high dependence on foreign workers are also tied to issues of social inclusion and exclusion in labor policies. Some exclusive provisions are for nationals only or are based on other exclusion criteria. Importantly, public sector work allows for a better work-life balance than work in the market-driven private sector.

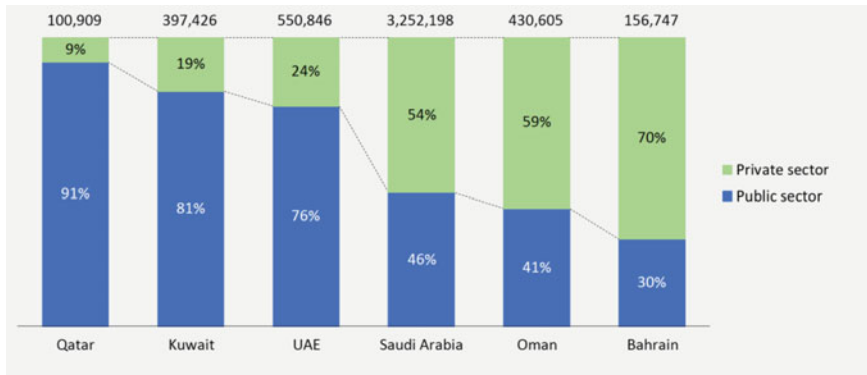
In the Arab Gulf, the preference for public sector work among nationals is strong (Exhibit 7.14), accounting for a strong majority of citizen employment in Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE. In 2020, Qatar has the largest share of nationals—91 percent—working in the public sector while Bahrain has the largest share of nationals—70 percent) working in the private sector.

The Arab Gulf countries have very similar economies—largely as a result of the high dependence on oil incomes and the rentierist policy structures—that allow for the funding of a large public sector. Oil incomes provide a greater capacity for Gulf states to relocate these rents to bolster public sector employment levels across both genders (Herb, 2014). Exhibit 7.15 illustrates the magnitude of this capacity by presenting the public sector wage bill in the Arab Gulf countries, which accounts for anywhere between one-quarter and nearly one-half of all public expenditures. The variation among Arab Gulf countries, however, is great, with countries like Kuwait allocating more than one-quarter of their GDP to the public sector wage bill.

Notably, public sector employment across the globe is primarily composed of women: In 2019, OECD countries averaged 58 percent women in the public workforce, compared with 45 percent in total employment. Arab Gulf women are overrepresented in the public sector, largely because of the migrant-heavy labor market, where low-wage migrant female labor has dominated with the result that national



**Exhibit 7.13** Structure of the Arab Gulf workforce (Source Raimundo Soto [2016]. Labor market structures in Arab countries: what role for minimum wages? ILO. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/genericdocument/wcms\\_210614.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/genericdocument/wcms_210614.pdf))

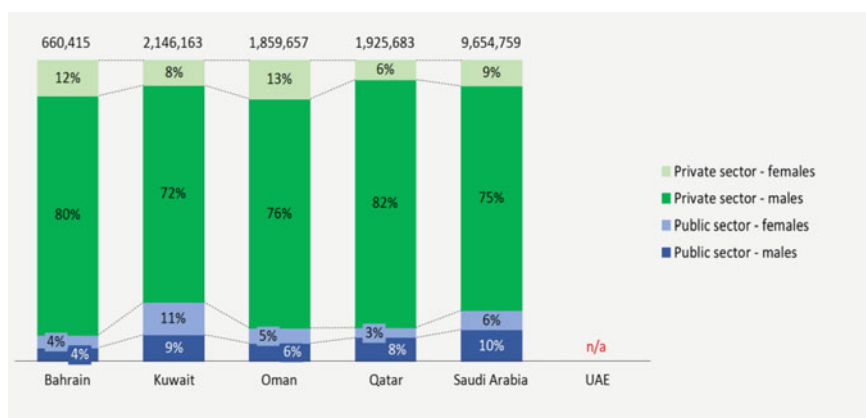


**Exhibit 7.14** Sectoral breakdown of citizen labor force across the Arab Gulf, 2020 (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal. Note Figures for the UAE are estimates)

women are discouraged from entering the private sector (Young, 2016). Exhibit 7.16 highlights how, despite its importance for citizen employment, the public sector across the Arab Gulf states represents a much smaller proportion of employment compared with the foreign-staffed private sector. This graphic is particularly able to highlight the highly masculinized labor forces in the Arab Gulf.

Country	Wage Bill as % of GDP	Wage Bill as % of Public Expenditures
Bahrain	10.97	30.36
Kuwait	27.05	41.02
Oman	13.77	26.67
Qatar	10.96	31.96
KSA	18.70	46.38
UAE	8.18	25.56

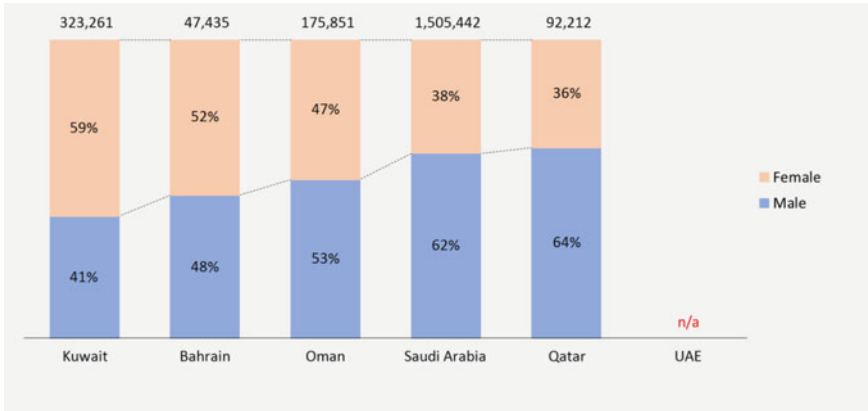
**Exhibit 7.15** Size of public sector wage bill by GDP and public expenditures, 2020 (*Source* Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators, World Bank Data Bank, Accessed November 26, 2022)



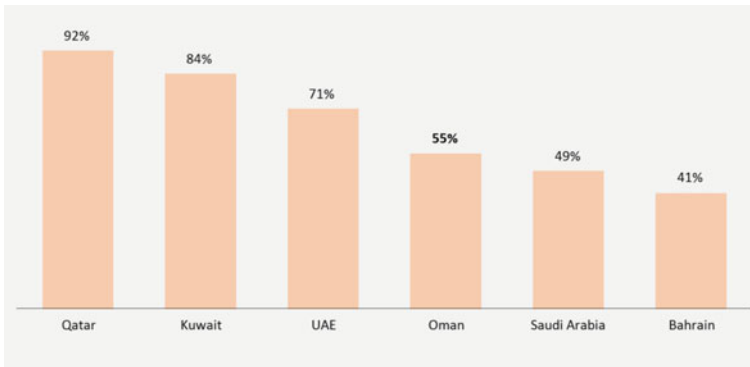
**Exhibit 7.16** Total employment in the Arab Gulf by sector and sex, 2020 (*Source* Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal)

The following Exhibits demonstrate the significant role that public sector employment plays in providing opportunities for women citizens in the Arab Gulf states. As seen in Exhibit 7.17, women make up over 50 percent of the public sector workforce in Kuwait and Bahrain, with Oman following closely. Furthermore, Exhibit 7.18 sheds light on the proportion of citizen women participating in the labor force, with 92 percent of citizen women in Qatar being employed in the public sector, despite having the largest gender gap in the region. This highlights the importance of the public sector as a crucial source of economic opportunities for women.

These workforce imbalances—whereby nationality and sex intersect in defining ways within the public and private sector workforces—reflect better provisions in the legal frameworks regulating labor in the public sector, compared to the private sector, across all the Arab Gulf countries (Aref & Al Kahlout, 2015). Financed by oil profits, jobs for nationals in the public sector tend to have shorter working hours and higher wages. Research on national women in the UAE and Qatar shows that women prefer to work in the public sector for these very reasons (James-Hawkins et al., 2017;



**Exhibit 7.17** Breakdown of Arab Gulf citizen public sector labor forces by sex, 2020 (Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal)



**Exhibit 7.18** Percentage of citizen female labor force employed in the public sector, 2020 (Note Figures for the UAE are estimates. Source Bahrain Labor Market Regulatory Authority [LMRA], Kuwait Labor Market Information System [LMIS], Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information [NCSI], Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority [PSA], Saudi General Statistics Authority, and the UAE Government portal)

Marmenout & Lirio, 2014). Moreover, it is argued that the high wages in the public sector, and associated welfare benefits, result in high-income households which thus reduces the economic need for women to work (Moghadam, 2005). Studies in the region confirm that many women seek employment for personal and professional growth, as well as for financial autonomy, rather than for financial need (Ennis, 2019a; Prager, 2020).

However, as noted earlier, with ongoing global economic challenges and the short lifespan of resource-dependent wealth, Arab Gulf countries are under pressure to

correct these imbalances in the workforce as well as to reduce the public sector wage bills. Consequently, Gulf states have continued to develop and implement economic diversification plans and policies to reduce dependence on foreign labor through the drafting of the national vision plans and development strategies presented above. In the aggregate, these plans support the expansion of private and manufacturing sectors, supporting national entrepreneurship (Ennis, 2019a; Young, 2016), and incentives for both citizen workers (e.g., through minimum wages and wage 'top-up' programs) and employers (e.g., through nationalization programs—Kuwaitization, Qatarization, etc.) to increase citizen employees in the private sector (Arab News, 9 July 2021; Fattah, 2021; Gulf Times, 2022; Reuters, 2020). Nationalization policies specifically aim to increase and diversify the representation of nationals in the workforce and build local human capital, including that of women.

While nationalization policies may benefit the employment of national women (and men), they may at the same time hamper the hiring and career progression of foreign women in mid- to high-skilled jobs. While research on this is unavailable, anecdotal evidence indicates that nationality-based hiring policies are indeed affecting foreign women's job prospects. Furthermore, Young (2016) found that Arab Gulf economies with higher proportions of non-national women, such as Kuwait and Bahrain, are also more likely to have higher numbers of citizen women in the workforce. Hence, it appears that supporting women's employment regardless of nationality may not hurt local women's economic empowerment. Increasing the presence and visibility of foreign women in the Arab Gulf workplace may in fact help ease citizen women's entry into the workforce.

Given the notable importance of the public sector for Arab Gulf women's employment, ensuring that public sector employment opportunities are quality offerings is especially important. However, a major challenge, especially in the Arab Gulf, is promoting women's access to leadership and management positions in the public as well as private sectors. As shown in Exhibit 7.19, World Economic Forum (WEF) data reflects the gaps in women's leadership in all sectors across the Arab Gulf states. For example, in Saudi Arabia, women represent 23.9 percent of professional and technical workers, yet only 6.8 percent of decision-makers. A similar pattern is found in Kuwait where, despite having the highest representation of professional women (34.1 percent), only 13.6 percent are in senior and decision-making roles. The representation of women in the public sector—here defined in terms of political leaders in parliamentary and ministerial positions—is a fraction of these numbers.

The UAE, however, offers a critical exception to this, with 50 percent of parliamentarians and 27.3 percent of ministerial positions being held by women. In 2019, Presidential Resolution No. (1) of 2019 established a 50 percent quota for women in the Federal National Council (FNC). As a result of this policy, women's representation in the FNC rose from 7 to 20 seats (out of 40).

This section emphasized the significance of the overrepresentation of citizen women in the public sector as a second contextual factor in evaluating women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf states. The public sector plays a crucial role in providing employment opportunities for women and has the potential to make a significant impact on their empowerment. In the following section, we will delve

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	KSA	UAE
Overall ranking/score*	137/0.632	143/0.621	145/0.608	142/0.624	147/0.603	72/0.716
Legislators, Senior Officials, and managers	21.6%	13.6	11.1	15.1	6.8	21.5
Professional and technical works	32.6%	34.1	25.8	23.4	23.9	21.8
Women in parliament	15%	1.5	2.3	9.8	0	50
Women in ministerial positions	4.5%	6.7	12	7.1	0	27.3

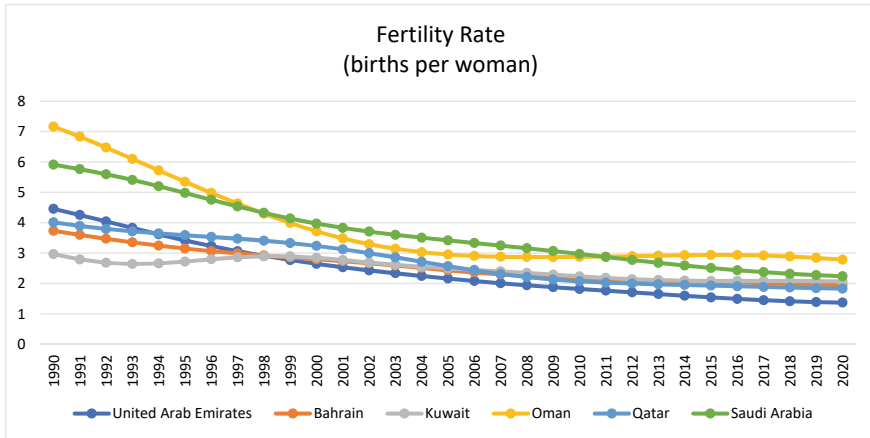
**Exhibit 7.19** Selected scores from the 2022 WEF gender gap report (*Source* World Bank Open Data Bank, Accessed November 21, 2022; \*scores represent the proportion of the remaining gap between men and women [e.g., 0.632 means that a gender gap of 63% remains across all fields of interest])

into the third contextual element affecting women's economic empowerment in the Arab Gulf, which is fertility.

### 7.4.3 Fertility

During the same period in which women's employment has risen in the Arab Gulf, fertility rates have decreased. Fertility is a critical issue in the Arab Gulf, given the constitutional emphasis on the family. The Arab Gulf states, with their small populations, have strong incentives to promote pro-natalist policies and increase their national populations. However, there are challenges to achieving both higher fertility and women's employment, as the latter has a traditional negative effect on fertility. Additionally, the preference for public sector employment among citizens complicates the situation, leading scholars to question whether these pro-birth and pro-women policies may be at odds with one another (Fargues, 2019).

The literature on gender and development typically views high fertility rates as a hindrance to women's empowerment and a sign of patriarchal systems, and that improved education, increased labor force participation, and access to contraception lead to a decline in fertility rates (Phan, 2013). Since the 1970s, fertility rates in the Arab Gulf have decreased from 6.8 births per woman (Al Awad & Chartouni, 2014) to between 1.4 (UAE) and 2.7 (Oman) births per woman in 2020. As shown in Exhibit 7.20, the decline in fertility rates across the Arab Gulf, particularly in Oman and Saudi Arabia, is particularly noteworthy. These rates now align with the average fertility rate of women across the OECD, which is 1.62 births per woman.



**Exhibit 7.20** Fertility rate of Arab Gulf countries (1990–2020) (Source World Bank Data Bank, Fertility rate [births per woman]. Accessed November 26, 2022)

Research suggests that multiple reasons underlie the decline in fertility across the Arab Gulf countries, with more time spent in education and delayed age at first marriage being among the most significant. For example, studies in the UAE and Saudi Arabia found that women’s marriage delay and high female educational levels were more significant than employment status in determining fertility levels (Al Awad & Chartouni, 2014; Salam, 2013). In Oman, the delaying and spacing of births and marriage delays were most impactful (Islam, 2017). In contrast, research in Qatar found that fertility decline was more strongly attributable to employment status but was also affected by rising age at first marriage (Fargues, 2019).

The interplay between fertility and women’s employment reinforces dominant gender norms and stereotypes. While increased participation in education and employment opportunities is often touted as the primary cause of declining fertility rates among women, multiple structural and social factors, including declining marriage rates and high divorce rates, also play a role (Abbasi-Shavazi & Torabi, 2012). The pressure to maintain high fertility rates in these small Arab Gulf nations is predominantly placed on women, despite the challenges faced by both women and men in balancing childrearing and career pursuits. This tension between policies promoting women’s empowerment and policies supporting work-life reconciliation is evident in the Arab Gulf’s policy frameworks, highlighting the need for a more nuanced approach to the international women’s agenda and raising questions about which policies best serve women’s well-being. For example, as is discussed further in the next section, generous leave policies aimed at enabling women to perform care work while also working may be seen as both empowering and aligned with neoliberal women’s agendas, promoting women’s economic engagement above all else.

#### ***7.4.4 Traditional Gender Roles Around Domestic Work And Caring Responsibilities***

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) recognized the importance of addressing women's care work and domestic responsibilities and called for their inclusion in discussions about women in the economy. However, in 2015, the United Nations took this one step further and included care labor as a key aspect of SDG 5 on gender equality. SDG 5.4 specifically calls on states to acknowledge and value the unpaid care and domestic work performed by women, and to support this work through the provision of public services, social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibilities within households and families.

A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2018) highlighted the disproportionate burden of care work on women globally, with women performing 76.2 percent of total hours of unpaid care work, which is more than three times the amount performed by men. This disparity has a significant impact on women's economic opportunities, with over 606 million women worldwide reporting that care responsibilities prevent them from participating in the workforce. The report found that six Arab Gulf states, including Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, are among the top ten countries in terms of the amount of time women spend on childcare. The data shows that women in Qatar spend the most time on childcare (394 min), followed by Oman (361 min), Kuwait (283 min), UAE (278 min), Bahrain (269 min), and Saudi Arabia (260 min). Notably, Qatar and Oman also have high levels of men's participation in care work, with 202 and 293 min spent on childcare, respectively, which is higher than the reported levels in many other countries (ILO, 2018).

It is challenging to determine the exact measurements used for distinguishing between citizen and foreign women in the data set. However, the high rankings of all Arab Gulf countries in terms of time spent on childcare suggest that the demographics and imbalances in the workforce are a matter that requires clarification. The treatment of domestic workers, who make up a significant proportion of caregivers and female workers in the Arab Gulf, is a contentious issue when it comes to labor force participation statistics. It is important to provide clarity in this area, given the international and national-level differences in definitions. These results cannot be solely attributed to fertility, as countries like Oman and Saudi Arabia have high fertility rates, nor can they be easily linked to women's labor force participation, as Qatar, for example, has high labor force participation rates but also a heavy burden of childcare time.

The data on care work in the Arab Gulf states, although limited, raises the question of how much of this burden is being carried by paid domestic workers, and how much is being shouldered by citizen women. The perception of mothers as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners still prevails in the region, even though many of the care work tasks are performed by paid domestic workers. The generous leave policies offered by the Arab Gulf states also play a role in this dynamic and warrant further examination.



The data presented in Exhibit 7.21 shows various types of leave options for public sector employees in the Arab Gulf region, with female-specific leaves being highlighted in red. This information highlights the generous leave provisions in the region, which include not only maternity and childcare leaves, but also leaves for prolonged illness, education and training, and political participation (in the case of Kuwait). These policies, while aimed at supporting women's role as primary caregivers, also provide work-life balance that is rare in other countries. It is important to consider these policies when examining the childcare statistics mentioned earlier, as they may indicate a greater ability for Arab Gulf citizens to spend time at home rather than a hindrance to employment.

It is important to emphasize that the allocation of leaves described above is not equally accessible to all migrant women. As demonstrated in Exhibit 7.21, Qatari women are entitled to five years of paid leave to care for a disabled child under Qatar Civil Human Resources Law No. 15 of 2016. However, this benefit is not extended to non-Qatari women working in the same field. Similarly, Muslim women in all GCC countries are granted four months and ten days of paid leave in the event of a spouse's death, according to Shari'a law, whereas non-Muslim women are only entitled to 15 days of paid leave.

The policy framework in the Arab Gulf region places a strong emphasis on family well-being and values work-life reconciliation for women, rather than solely focusing on their economic success. Despite the provision of leaves and the availability of domestic workers and institutionalized care, working women in the region still struggle to balance their careers and family responsibilities, as shown by research in Qatar and the UAE (Al-Ansari, 2020; Marmenout & Lirio, 2014). This challenge extends to women in high-level and managerial positions, who face even greater time demands (Prager, 2020; Yaghi, 2016). As a result, the representation of women in the public sphere and their participation in leadership and decision-making positions is still limited in the Arab Gulf. The prevailing stereotype still views the home as a woman's primary priority, while men's involvement in household duties and childcare remains limited. This manifestation of gender-based discrimination in the region can be linked to cultural factors rooted in tribal heritage, a conservative lifestyle, and family pressures that impose male protection on women (Murray & Zhang-Zhang, 2018).

In this section, we have explored how the experiences of citizen women in the Arab Gulf serve as a lens through which to examine the limits of the 'universal' women's empowerment agenda. Our analysis has revealed the challenges of codifying and achieving empowerment that is relevant to and reflective of the local population's needs. By examining the circumstances of women's empowerment and disempowerment in the Arab Gulf policy space, we have highlighted the ways in which these 'universal' agendas perpetuate 'orientalist' discourses that undermine the rights of women in the region, for example by relying on incomplete labor force participation metrics. At the same time, we have emphasized the need to acknowledge and value the positive aspects of Gulf policies, such as work-life reconciliation initiatives. Given the growing demands for better work-life balance in Western nations, it is imperative to revisit the 'universal' women's empowerment agenda and question the

Type of leave	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	KSA	UAE
<i>Accouchement/Delivery</i>	2 months	2 months	50 days	2 months, but 3 months for twins	70 days	3 months
<i>Family</i>		6 months to 4 years for married females or divorced/widowed females with children				
<i>Iddah</i>	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females or until she gives birth if pregnant	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females	4 months and 10 days for Muslim females
<i>Leave for accompanying a patient</i>	Up to 60 days outside Bahrain, but up to 7 days inside Bahrain	Up to 6 months	Up to 45 days with full pay	Available with full pay	Available	Up to 1 month to accompany first- or second-degree relatives, where the first 15 days are fully paid
<i>Leave for accompanying a spouse</i>	Available without pay if spouse is on an official assignment abroad	Available without pay for female staff members to accompany staff member husband	Available without pay for male employees to accompany their wives on missions or study leaves abroad	Available without pay if spouse is on a diplomatic mission, secondment, or scholarship	Available up to 10 years	
<i>Leave for accompanying her sick child</i>		Available with full pay for female staff			Available for female employees if child is under 12 years old	
<i>Leave for taking care of a child with disability</i>				Up to 5 years for female employees	Available for parents of children with disability who seek training in how to care for their children	
<i>Maternity</i>	Up to 2 years for female employees to care for a child under 6 years of age without pay	4 months after the end of the accouchement leave, where the first month is with full pay	Up to 1 year without pay		Up to 3 years with quarter pay after then end of the accouchement leave	
<i>Muhram</i>				Up to 1 month for official missions or training	-	
<i>Nursing</i>	2 hours daily for up to 2 years after giving birth	2 hours daily for up to 2 years after giving birth		2 hours daily for up to 2 years after giving birth		2 hours daily for a period of 4 months after giving birth
<i>Paternity</i>				3 days	3 days	3 working days
<i>Sick leave</i>	Up to 24 days per year	Up to 2 years	Up to 7 days at a time, or up to 6 months with full pay in exceptional cases	Up to 10 working days per year	Up to 2 years, where the first 6 months are with full pay	Up to 15 working days per year
<i>Special leave for political candidates</i>		Available for the duration of the election period				
<i>Study</i>	Available with full pay depending on the entity's future needs	Available with full, half, or no pay depending on fulfillment of eligibility criteria	Available with full pay to complete studies at the employee's own expense	Available	Available without pay if employee has served for a minimum of 3 years & received a performance evaluation of very good	Available with full pay depending on the entity's future needs

**Exhibit 7.21** Leaves of absence outlined in Arab Gulf Human Resources laws for the public sector (Leaves of absence related to work-life balance are highlighted in red)

oversimplified assumption that employment and managerial positions automatically equate to empowerment for women.

## 7.5 Conclusion

The title of this chapter, 'Through the Eye of a Needle,' refers to a metaphor for the limited and unrealistic terms set by the normative capitalist women's empowerment agenda. This raises questions about who can truly be empowered under these narrow conditions. Despite more than 40 years of progress on the international women's empowerment agenda, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the ongoing struggles faced by women seeking empowerment through neoliberal means. Meanwhile, the dominant narratives of women's empowerment ignore the perspectives of women who do not subscribe to these values, leaving Arab Gulf states caught between the demands of modern statecraft and the needs of their citizens.

It is crucial to note that these states are subjected to an orientaling gaze by international women's empowerment agendas and their metrics, which present a biased and inaccurate picture of the progress made by citizen women. As a result, Arab Gulf states are doubly disadvantaged: first, by the expectation to conform to an agenda that is not in line with their values, and second, by the skewed reporting of statistics that perpetuates the objectifying narrative. This leads to Western analyses interpreting poor performance as a perpetuation of the essentialism script and perpetuating the idea that it is necessary to 'save brown women' from their communities, cultures, and states.

This chapter has called into question the universality of the international women's empowerment agenda in the post-COVID era. The Arab Gulf region provides a unique case study in the realm of work-life reconciliation policies, which demonstrate a multifaceted approach to women's engagement in economic, social, domestic, and political pursuits. The public policies in the Arab Gulf show a clear emphasis on supporting both women's work and family life, which may challenge the normative definitions of empowerment that are based on neoliberal principles. What does it mean to be empowered when empowerment is not limited to employment policies, or when supportive policies may increase time spent in childcare, or when discriminatory pension policies acknowledge women's domestic labor? Through examining the Arab Gulf's policy framework, this chapter offers a starting point for exploring these questions and considering how a deeper understanding of local context and values can broaden the scope of women's empowerment. Future research is needed to further examine these issues and how they can enhance women's complex agency and desires.

In conclusion, this chapter presents several policy implications based on its findings. Firstly, the international women's empowerment agenda needs to be rethought in the post-COVID era, as the pandemic has exposed its limitations. Secondly, essentializing narratives that perpetuate biases and inaccuracies about women's progress in Arab Gulf states should be avoided in future reporting and analysis. Thirdly, local context and values should be valued to broaden the scope of women's empowerment, particularly in the Arab Gulf region. Fourthly, policies that support both women's work and family life should be implemented, challenging normative definitions of empowerment based on neoliberal principles. Finally, future research is needed to

examine the effectiveness of the Arab Gulf's policy framework in enhancing women's empowerment and the role of local context and values in this regard.

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