

## Gulf Women at Work

### The Impact of Workplace Laws, Cultural Norms, and Islamic Interpretations on Women's Choices

Since the discovery of oil in the Arabian Gulf in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have capitalized upon newfound wealth to support rapid growth and modernization. In these countries, which include Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, women face difficulties in finding employment at the structural, cultural, and individual levels (Metcalf 134-35). At the structural level, women are disadvantaged by discriminatory laws (Moghadam 9), and women's participation in the labor force is the lowest in the world (Metcalf 134). At the cultural level, both men and women believe firmly in divided gender roles; women adhere to a code of modesty to uphold the purity of the community (Metcalf 135). At the individual level, women in GCC countries demonstrate their firm commitment to Islam by seeking to live out the religion's doctrines in daily life (Metcalf 135).

Together, these factors prevent women in GCC countries from entering the labor force: to paraphrase World Bank findings, women across the MENA region "face greater obstacles finding jobs and playing active public roles in their society than women do elsewhere" (Moghadam 9). Thus, in spite of gender parity in tertiary education in Gulf countries, there has been no increase in women's employment (Littrell and Bertsch 250). The low labor participation of women negatively impacts GCC countries for a number of reasons. The World Economic Forum concludes that countries which prevent women from working misallocate half their talent and human resources (Moghadam 9). Often, women's inability to work reflects a number of other disadvantaged positions in society, including a lack of political participation, disparate legal rights, and fewer opportunities for social and cultural expression (Moghadam 10).

This paper will outline and analyze the forces in culture, education, and the workplace

which prevent women in GCC countries from seeking employment. It will draw upon Saba Mahmood's field research of Islamic feminist political movements to articulate the ways in which women may use religious education to combat oppressive traditions and justify their roles in the public sphere. Using the framework of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, it will argue for broad-based changes in workforce policies related to women, as well as the establishment of new support and training institutions. Women in GCC countries face barriers to employment at the structural, cultural, and individual levels: therefore, long-term solutions demand that improved government policy be accompanied by changes to individual beliefs and cultural norms.

### **The Capability Approach**

Negative freedom may best be defined as the absence of interference and external obstacles to an individual's choices. Contrarily, positive freedom "is understood as the capacity to realize an autonomous will, one generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of 'universal reason' or 'self-interest,' and hence unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition" (Mahmood 11). In order for an individual to possess any degree of positive freedom, he or she must have a set of basic capabilities. To this end, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum articulate the concept of the capability approach, stating that freedom must endow people with the "possession of different capabilities to achieve valuable human functionings" (Alexander 4). Rather than asking about an individual's satisfaction or income, the capability approach scrutinizes what a person may conceivably be, do, or accomplish within his or her lifetime (Nussbaum 12). In regard to the freedom of women, Martha Nussbaum argues, "liberty is not just a matter of having rights on paper, it requires being in a position to exercise those rights. And this requires material and institutional resources, including legal and social acceptance of the legitimacy of women's claims. The state that is going to guarantee people rights effectively is going to have to take a stand about more than the importance of these basic rights themselves" (54).

Sen and Nussbaum advocate for governments not only to abolish policies and practices oppressive to women, but also to support laws and institutions which bolster women's capabilities. However, GCC countries fall well short of Sen and Nussbaum's prescriptions, often failing to grant even a basic sense of negative freedom to women in the workforce. The cultural norms applied to women in GCC countries are often burdensome, and laws surrounding the educational system and the workplace both reflect and reinforce these norms.

### **Major Issues: Culture, Education, and Workplace Laws**

The cultures of GCC countries are built upon a strict division between the realms of women and men. On one side of the divide, men assume the role of a family's strong and courageous guardian and provider. Conversely, women are depicted as weak and dependent (Al-Lamky 58), and must tend to their duties as wife and homemaker while also serving as symbol of the community's purity and piety. These dominant cultural messages often cause women to restrict their own options, believing they are not entitled to a right to presence in the public sphere.

Women living in GCC societies assume the burden of carrying a community's purity and honor. Dawn Chatty aptly phrases this mentality in writing that "women have been and continue to be manipulated to represent symbolically the cultural integrity of the dominant culture in the country" (247). Though this representation of purity may appear symbolic, the methods of assuming such a role profoundly affect women's daily lives. Men come to be seen as women's guardians, "entrusted to oversee and control women's sexuality and mobility as well as their access to a community's symbolic and material resources" (Mahmood 186). Furthermore, women must monitor their own interactions and conduct in public in order to fulfill their roles as a community's pious representatives. This role means that women, even if they are willing to work in a mixed-gender environment or in a male-dominated field, might be deterred by the negative stigma assigned to these positions

by the rest of society (Rutledge et. al. 186).

It is for this reason that women who work often have no choice but to work in socially-approved “women’s jobs.” Women who desire work are “expected to be in the areas of education, health (mainly nurses), and other support and clerical jobs, largely at the lower end of organizational hierarchies” (Littrell and Bertsch 259). These limited opportunities are justified on the basis that pious women must avoid the scrutiny and attention of the public eye (Ramazani 263). They are further justified on the premise of social stability: “for the sake of the well-being of families and the harmony of society, men and women should be aware of their particular assigned roles and not covet the roles assigned to the other sex” (Ben Shitrit 86).

The educational system both reflects and reinforces the dominant cultural norms of GCC countries. GCC governments enforce a division between the fields men and women may study at university. Women are banned from a number of college concentrations, often including architecture, certain fields in medicine, diplomatic service, commerce, business, and engineering (Peterson 4; Chatty 251; Metcalfe 134). These bans are justified on the basis that women must not work outdoors in the interest of their safety and purity (Chatty 251). Educational restrictions prevent women from gaining the necessary qualifications to pursue a number of careers.

The control of GCC governments over curriculum content, especially religious curricula, has a pervasive effect on the outcomes and livelihoods of female students. In Saudi Arabia, for example, religious clerics determine all content of religious lessons; these constitute up to half of a student’s studies. As a result, Wahhabi religious doctrines reach every student and every home. The color-coded textbooks — pink for girls and blue for boys — exemplify an “educational system designed to consolidate the traditionalist, patriarchal social order” (Yamani 83). These one-sided religious lessons limit young women by enforcing gendered spheres of existence in which a woman must stay at home.

In the workplace, restrictive cultural norms are propagated and supported by rule of

law. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are all notable for the prevalence of segregated workplaces (Metcalf 135). Though the segregated workplace may appear harmless, its effects negatively impact organizations at the structural and individual levels.

At the structural level, workplace segregation hinders coordination and clarity between men's and women's departments (Al-Ahmadi 153). The work of women is not considered equal to that of men, and women's sections are often displayed as subordinate on organizational charts (Al-Ahmadi 153). Bias at the organizational level has a personal effect on women in the workplace. It is difficult, if not impossible, for women to attain professional decision-making positions at the top of organizational hierarchies (Nath 183; Metcalf 135). Women work primarily in clerical and support jobs at significantly lower salaries than their male counterparts (Nath 183). Because women in segregated workplaces are prevented from assuming valuable, decision-making positions, some consider them to be "just a decoration and a sign of modernization" (Nath 183).

In sum, the rapid shift of GCC countries from rural, tribal communities to modern metropolises of industry and oil wealth has placed a great deal of strain on dominant cultural norms. Gulf states have drawn and enhanced a "conflictual duality in their attempt on the one hand to promote women's active involvement in the workplace and on the other hand, implicitly foster patriarchal values and restrictive gender roles by reinforcing the 'feminine' nature of women versus the 'guardianship' and economic responsibilities of men" (Al-Lamky 59). Discrimination against women in GCC countries is pervasive and institutionalized, evident in segregated workplaces, cultures based on strictly divided sex roles, a lack of career opportunities, and educational systems that serve to encourage and propagate repressive norms. Although the current situation of women in the Gulf looks bleak, there remains a possibility of improvement as individuals change their societies from within.

## The “Mosque Movement”: Reform in Islam, Society, and Government

The Islamic faith has a pervasive impact on women’s everyday lives in Arab countries. In countries such as Kuwait and Morocco, religion justifies reform, and Islam is not seen as contradictory to modernization, globalization, or progress (Al-Lamky 63). Contrarily, many GCC countries use religious rulings to legitimize oppressive policies against women and minorities (Ghanea-Hercock 707). However, there is reason to believe that more egalitarian interpretations of Islam are on the rise, and that women and men of Arab countries increasingly recognize there is “much confusion between what Islam is and what is culturally associated with Islam” (Metcalf 133). The rise of newer, more egalitarian interpretations of Islam has the potential to profoundly impact women’s status and activities within GCC countries.

In recent years, scholars have issued more balanced interpretations of Islamic texts and rulings. This movement stems from the understanding that Islamic law has been shaped solely by men, in an environment of patriarchal cultural traditions (Moghadam 11-12). The works of respected scholar Abd al-Halim Abu Shuqqah exemplify egalitarian ideals in Islamic law. Through close scrutiny of the Quran and the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, Abu Shuqqah demonstrates that “women have the right to participate in the umma’s [community’s] productive life, to have sexual pleasure, and to pursue various kinds of social relationships that are often considered to be reserved only for men” (Mahmood 111).

Women benefit from these scholarly works in two ways. First, they are empowered to question the authenticity of patriarchal doctrine justified under the banner of Islam. In her book *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood documents the rise of the “mosque movement,” an informal nationwide network of Egyptian women who combine their devout faith in Islam with critical scrutiny of oppressive tradition. In Egypt, women meet on a regular basis to study religious texts. Through their meetings, they gain knowledge and separate oppressive customs from religion, saying, “they [cultural traditions] have their own history

but Islam is not their origin”’ (qtd. in Mahmood 97). Through the mosque movement, women cultivate the ability to think for themselves and observe religion and tradition with a critical eye.

Second, women of the mosque movement are empowered to apply classical Islamic concepts to resolve their own modern-day challenges. Under the banner of Islam, women assert their rights to work and education in a firm and rational manner. Hajja Faiza, a religious leader at a Cairo mosque, argues against complete gender-based segregation in this way:

It doesn't mean that a woman should not go out from her house. If she is not to go out of her house at all, then what is the point of having all the instructions about wearing modest dress? Neither does it mean that women and men cannot make eye contact when they work together, for example, or when they buy and sell from each other, or in an educational setting. Now, tell me, did the Prophet not meet and talk to women? Did women not pray directly behind men in the mosque without any partition/separation between them?

(qtd. in Mahmood 108)

It may appear contradictory that women use classical Islamic doctrines to enter male-dominated spheres and justify their own public presence, while “the very idioms they use to enter these arenas are grounded in discourses that have historically secured their subordination to male authority” (Mahmood 5-6). However, women’s work within the mosque movement should be viewed as effective and worthwhile. Islam is a fundamental element of Arab societies, and “any attempt to affect [*sic*] social change will have to contend with the cultural norms and values pertaining to women and Islam” (Al-Lamky 63). The mosque movement is a remarkable way of working within a widely approved religious discourse. Using Islamic texts as a tool, women uphold their piety, build character and knowledge, and solve their modern-day struggles. These “socially authorized forms of

performance [are] the potentialities — the ground if you will — through which the self is realized” (Mahmood 31).

Despite the optimism furnished by the mosque movement, one must question the connection between a women’s movement in Egypt and the lives of women in GCC countries. Although the mosque movement is widespread in Egypt, such forms of religious involvement are rare and undocumented, if not nonexistent, in the Gulf. Women in Egypt form and shape the movement only because the government has encouraged and facilitated education, literacy, and social mobility among women (Mahmood 66). These factors, in addition to the contributions of Muslim scholars such as Abu Shuqqah, are essential to equipping women in their religious and personal endeavors.

From the experiences of women in Egypt’s mosque movement, it is evident that women in GCC countries require three major conditions in order to take a more authoritative and interpretive role in Islamic discourse. These include an educational system that teaches basic skills of reading and writing, access to a variety of Islamic interpretive texts, and a society egalitarian enough to allow women to discuss and study the religion for themselves. While women have an excellent basic education in GCC countries, they are currently restricted to religious education within government dictates and a culture which deters them from any form of public activism. Therefore, it is evident that Gulf women will be unable to participate in a similar “mosque movement” in the immediate future. However, the slow but inevitable cultural shift in the Gulf will almost certainly allow women to access, study, and discuss Islamic texts for themselves. Moreover, these broad-based cultural changes are the only way to ensure that other, more technical empowerment initiatives in government are successful.

The religious and political implications of the mosque movement are a vital component in improving women’s status in the Gulf. Asya Al-Lamky notes that, although GCC governments have sought to empower women through various initiatives, “none are able to address the issue of gender equity comprehensively and are simply insufficient in achieving



long-term gains” (62). This is because governmental and legal changes must accompany cultural shifts in order to be effective. Though the government may state that women are equal or may assert women’s rights to lead productive, fulfilling lives both in the private and public spheres, their statements are useless if women do not believe them as well. Through the mosque movement, women gain the knowledge and conviction that they too should have “a sense of entitlement that they should be able to claim the Islamic tradition” (Mahmood 66). The work of women within the mosque movement is a fundamental component to Gulf States’ success in providing women constructive opportunities for employment.

However, the work of women is not enough. At the legal level, GCC governments must grant women a form of negative freedom by eliminating differential treatment within the law. Nazila Ghanea-Hercock identifies two lenses through which to scrutinize the legal systems of Arab states. In analyzing laws, governments must consider their positive duties, as “such reasoning calls for the accountability of states for the actual treatment that is meted out to women in practice, not just the theoretical chimera of their legal equality” (724). Essentially, governments must evaluate the real-life implications of their laws before addressing ink on paper. Secondly, citizens and government officials in GCC countries must be exposed to the differential treatment of women in Muslim countries (Ghanea-Hercock 724). The range of experiences between women across these countries is highly disparate — a woman’s rights in Saudi Arabia look nothing like a woman’s rights in Morocco — so it makes little sense to simply use “Islam” to justify the treatment of women under the law. Using these two viewpoints, GCC governments are equipped to scrutinize the patriarchal implications of their laws and make changes accordingly.

Altering the legal system will successfully eliminate injustices in law, but governments must also seek to support and promote the equality of women in occupations to enhance their capabilities in the public sphere. Beverly Metcalfe recommends a four-part strategy to improve women’s support institutions in GCC governments, including national women’s strategies aligned with MDG priorities, women’s units in government offices “to ensure

that women’s concerns are considered in policy planning and development,” women’s leadership training initiatives, and consultation with women’s organizations when creating policy (137-138). Metcalfe’s suggestions attach concrete institutional commitments to the law, ensuring that women in the workforce receive support and consideration from governmental institutions. This active approach for governments aligns well with Sen and Nussbaum’s capability approach by providing tangible support for women’s capabilities and development.

## **Conclusion**

In order for women in GCC countries to secure fulfilling livelihoods, they require far more than comforting laws enshrined in government agencies. Effective solutions to women’s employment require changes at the structural, cultural, and individual levels. While it is first necessary to eliminate glaring injustices in the law, it is equally important to bolster women’s capabilities by establishing support institutions, training initiatives, and mechanisms by which women’s voices are considered in political decisions. However, these efforts are not adequate. A genuine cultural shift must occur in tandem with these laws, as “reform, and democratic institutions, must arise naturally from existing society — they cannot be imported or imposed by force, and change does not happen overnight” (Nourai-Simone 272). Women play an important role in cultural change. By accessing and discussing more egalitarian interpretations of Islam, women in GCC countries will gain the knowledge and conviction to combat repressive traditions and justify their roles in the public sphere. Changes in religious belief at the individual level will impact cultural norms as a whole. The work of women, combined with effective action by the government, will ensure that women in GCC countries may choose lives of fulfillment without restrictions or regrets.

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