

The Changing Roles of Arab Women in Bahrain

*E. James Fordyce, Layla Rhadi,
Maurice D. Van Arsdol, Jr and Mary Beard Deming*

In Bahrain, emancipation of Bahraini women has been coming about in response to economic requirements. Labor force growth in Bahrain has been discussed in the following excerpt taken from a recently published book, *Bahrain and the Gulf*.*

Economic growth, coupled with substantial government expenditures on physical infrastructure and social services, created substantial educational and occupational opportunities for Bahrainis as well as employment opportunities for non-Bahrainis. Foreign labor has been described as having been used as an elastic source of labor supply, pending Bahrainization of the labor force (United Nations Fund for Population Activities 1979), a development that is facilitated by increasing Bahraini female employment. This report describes the growth of the female labor force; labor force participation rates by sex, age, and education. An important question is: To what extent can and will native Arab women eventually replace foreign labor in the Gulf? Bahrain is not a 'typical' Arab country with respect to the roles of women, but as a pioneer in economic diversification among Gulf states it may be a bellweather for changes in the role of women elsewhere in the Arabian Gulf. To understand the recent changes in the role of women in Bahrain, these labor force developments must be considered.

Table 1 describes Bahrain's labor force by sex and nationality from 1951 to 1981. Growth and diversification of Bahrain's economy between 1959 and 1981 were associated with an increase of 220 percent in Bahrain's total labor force. Mean annual rates of labor force growth increased from 3 percent in the 1959-65 period to 14.2 percent in 1971-81. Of the total labor force increase from 1959 to 1971, 34.8 percent was due to Bahrainis, 11.1 percent was due to Bahraini females and 6.7 percent was due to non-Bahraini females.

The increase in the labor force from 1959 to

1981 was due to a shift from 52 percent to 62 percent of those over 15 years of age in the labor force, to changes in age composition and to the increasing movement of Bahraini women into the labor force. Bahraini women accounted for one-fourth of the increase Bahraini labor force participation.

Although there has been some emigration of natives, the Bahraini labor force has increased faster than the total native-born population since 1971. Bahrainis born after 1950 began reaching working age about 1971 and thereafter, a time of economic expansion and employment growth. In addition the Bahraini female labor force has grown faster than that of any other sex or nationality category. Increasing 86 percent between 1965 and 1971, and an additional 560 percent the following decade, Bahraini women in the labor force constituted nearly one-fifth of all Bahrainis in the labor force in 1981 and one-twelfth of the total labor force of the country.

Unlike earlier periods, the female share of the Bahraini labor force was greater in 1981 than the female share of the non-Bahraini labor force. From 1971 to 1981, 31.1 percent of the total increase in the labor force was due to Bahrainis, 12.0 percent was due to Bahraini women and 6.7 percent was due to non-Bahraini females. Bahraini women are now important participants in their country's labor force expansion.

Although Bahraini women have the highest rates of labor force participation among all the Gulf states, and although these rates are increasing, 82.5 percent of Bahraini women did not engage in economic activity outside the home in 1981. Participation by women in the labor force is typically interrupted by childbearing and childrearing res-

possibilities around the ages of 25 to 29. Among Bahraini women, labor force participation is concentrated in ages 20 to 24, after their education is completed but before marriage or the birth of their first child.

The median age of the labor force declined dramatically between 1971 and 1981 – from 34 to 29 years of age. This was due to high foreign immigration of younger people and increasing labor force participation by young Bahraini women. In 1971 Bahrainis were slightly older (at 35 years) than non-Bahrainis (at 32). By 1981 the median labor force age had dropped to 29 for Bahrainis but only to 30 for non-Bahrainis. The age difference by nationality was especially pronounced among women: In 1981 the median age of Bahraini women workers was 23 and that of immigrant women workers was 29.

Increasing educational attainment appears to have little influence in Bahrain on men's labor force participation, which is already quite high, but it has a profound effect on that of women. Higher education provides access to more attractive jobs and increases the motivation to use the training that has been received. In addition women's involvement in the labor force is facilitated by the delayed marriage and childbearing that is characteristic of women with more education.

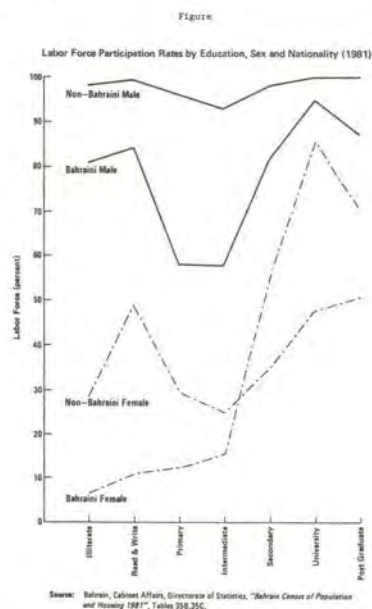
Figure 1 displays labor force participants rates by education for Bahraini and non-Bahraini men and women in 1981. Participation rates increase with higher education levels among women, especially Bahraini women. The labor force of Bahrain has grown rapidly since 1959 as a result of population growth, foreign immigration and the increasing participation of women. Even with emigration of Bahrainis, the native-born labor force grew 7 percent annually between 1971 and 1981. Increasing education has been associated with a greater participation of women in economic activity in Bahrain. High continued immigration could constrain female labor force participation if the economy does not continue to expand.

Table 1 : Labor Force by Sex and Nationality, 1959-81*

Nationality & Sex of Labor Force	1959	1965	1971	1981
Total	45,479	53,274	60,301	146,133
Male	44,126	51,251	57,052	126,808
Female	1,353	2,023	3,249	19,325
Bahraini	29,640	31,231	37,950	64,636
Male	28,683	30,236	36,102	52,460
Female	957	995	1,848	12,176
Non-Bahraini	15,839	22,043	22,351	81,497
Male	15,443	21,015	20,950	74,348
Female	396	1,028	1,401	7,149

*Data include unemployed as well as employed persons.

Sources: Bahrain, Population Census 1959, pp. 14-15; Bahrain, Finance Department, Fourth Census of Population: 1965, Table 8; Bahrain, Ministry of Finance and National Economy, Statistical Bureau, Statistics of the Population Census: 1971, Table 9; Bahrain, Cabinet Affairs, Directorate of Statistics, 'Bahrain Census of Population and Housing – 1981, Trends and Prospects,' Tables 30A, 30B, 30C.



(*) Nugent, Jeffrey B., Thomas, Theodore H. *Bahrain and the Gulf*. Croom Helm Ltd, Provident House, Burrell Row, Beckenham, Kent, 1985, pp. 56-59.