

## Education is the Key to Increase Gulf Women's Contribution in Economic Development

Before the discovery of oil in the Arab Gulf i.e. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain, conditions of women were correlated with the conditions of their husbands, and the classification of the family in the tribal and class systems.

Gulf society was divided into four classes:

1. Royal family or ruling Amirs.
2. Rich merchants
3. Farmers, pearl divers, ship builders, fishermen and Bedwins.
4. Servants.

Gulf women shared with their husbands the hardships of life when they were poor and enjoyed later the manifestations of affluence that came with the use of oil prices in order to contribute some income to their families.

Rural women represented the second exploited class in the Gulf after the servants. Despite the active role that rural women played in the agricultural sector, they were never economically independent or recognized by society and themselves as salary earners. In addition to their house responsibilities, women in the Gulf rural areas tilled the land, irrigated the farms, herded animals, collected dates, sold eggs or vegetables in the market place, wove carpets and made tents. Some of them worked as servants in the houses of rich merchants. During the long absence of their husbands at sea, wives of pearl divers in Kuwait and Bahrain, took full responsibility managing family affairs and would dive themselves when economic conditions demanded it.

Women and wives of the ruling class and the rich merchants were exempted from work. But the women in relation to men were inferior human-beings, exploited and not given any power. Their lives were always threatened with the fear that their rich husbands would marry other younger women, as they often did. Women from this class were kept invisible in order to

protect their «honour» and preserve the image of the family. Their main job was and still is to produce children and supervise the housework which was done primarily by servants. The women were totally idle and kept in their isolated harems.

In 1950 the Gulf region faced radical social and economic changes as a result of the discovery of oil. These changes have directly affected the status of women. The two major variables that affected the status of women were education and employment.

Despite progressive changes in education and opening of schools for both boys and girls, the Gulf region suffers from a high illiteracy rate, especially among women. With the exception of Bahrain and Kuwait, where women's education first started in 1928 in Bahrain and in 1937 in Kuwait.

Education of girls in Saudi Arabia officially started in 1960 and the policy of women's education has been to train women to be good housewives and mothers. Girls' education was carried by women teachers, mostly from Egypt and Palestine and in a totally segregated environment from boys.

Adult education was introduced in the Gulf States as a state policy. In an effort to annul illiteracy thousands of men and women benefitted from these programs, and hence encouraged their children of both sexes to go to school. Once the Gulf States adopted a welfare system where the state sponsors free education for all at all levels, inside or outside the country, many sought higher education abroad in Europe and the U.S.A. Once the newly educated classes returned to their backgrounds, they played an important role in convincing their parents to allow their brothers and sisters to follow their path. Also this new class of young men started looking for future wives among the educated girls, a factor that convinced a lot of families, especially mothers to encourage their daughters to complete their studies even up to university levels.

But Gulf Women, though educated, did not engage themselves in the work force. There are two reasons to explain this trend:

- First, the strong traditional beliefs of women's primary role, namely that of a housewife and a mother.
- Second, women's lack of financial need as every Gulf citizen benefits from the welfare system and is paid a check at the end of each month by the State.

In most of the Gulf States' demand for highly skilled labour, excludes men and women from work. Work depends entirely on imported labour force such as Egyptians, Palestinians, Lebanese, Pakistanis and Indians etc...

Some countries in the Gulf are more tolerant than others regarding women's employment. Kuwait, Bahrain, Dubai, Sharja and Oman are known to have less strict rules regarding women's work if compared with Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, where the strictest rules are observed.

In general, there are constraints and difficulties facing working women in the Gulf. Among them are the following:

1. Family restrictions: A woman might face a husband who orders her not to work. Her father and brother might do likewise, and she has to obey.
2. Lack of transportation: Women in Saudi Arabia, natives or foreigners alike are not allowed to drive. Often their husbands, brothers, fathers or drivers have to drive them to work. In the rest of the Gulf States women are allowed to drive, but it is the lack of public transportation that hinders women's movements.
3. Fear of rumours: Jobs that require a woman to work with men are looked down on and considered unsuitable for women with a status symbol.
4. Limited opportunities: Gulf women can hold public jobs as teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers and administrators but only in the female sector.
5. Lack of child care facilities: Women face difficulties finding child care facilities at work or outside work. Problems are eased however by extended family

cooperation where mothers - in - law or mothers could baby - sit for the children in their absence.

6. Lack of economic incentives: Women, married or single are not required by the Islamic Sharia to secure the family's income, which is considered the man's responsibility. Another reason is that some families do not need additional income.

Kuwait on the other hand tolerates women employment; it does not encourage work except in those cases where it directly contributes to the substitution of foreign labour and then only jobs which are socially acceptable by Kuwaiti standards. Thus women's labour is accepted neither to fill a need nor for the economic reward it produces. It seems primarily to be accepted to give educated girls something to fill time between graduation and marriage, or for the Kuwaitis to be modern and theoretically to provide Kuwaiti substitutes for non - Kuwaiti employees.

In conclusion definite changes are taking place in the Gulf that would eventually improve the lot of women, who make half the society. Gulf women do not feel they are given opportunities to contribute equally in their countries' development. They are analysed in subsidiary roles with their identities forged through men and hence their opportunities and choices are extremely limited. Education for both sexes is the key for providing a better life for the Gulf individual as the liberation of women could not be separated from the liberation of their societies from illiteracy, and discrimination. All indications seem to ascertain that Gulf women, indeed Gulf society, has still a long way to go.

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**N.B.** Those interested in the subject are advised to read «Social Science Research and Women in the Arab World». UNESCO, Paris, 1984.

