

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Labor Rights of National Women in the GCC

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**ABSTRACT:**

As part of the transition towards knowledge-based economies, the “Vision 2030” strategies of several GCC countries outline measures for skilling the national workforce. These measures aim to increase the employability and productivity of nationals and reduce dependency on migrant workers. This paper aims to investigate one of these trends—growing female labor force participation, and more specifically, the labor rights of women (nationals only) within the GCC. It traces the history of the legal framework and regulations in terms of employment status and wage rates of GCC female nationals and how these rights have evolved over the past forty decades. The paper ultimately highlights persistent (and differing) gender gaps in economic and political participation, illustrating the different stages in transition within the region and in response to different factors, including globalization.

**Keywords:** Female employment, Gulf, empowerment, political change, social change, female labour, gender pay gap, equality.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), professional skills are a critical asset that has the capacity to transform individuals, businesses, and societies in a dynamic, globalized world. As part of the transition towards knowledge-based economies, the “Vision 2030” strategies of several GCC countries outline measures for skilling the national workforce. These measures aim to increase the employability and productivity of nationals and reduce dependency on migrant workers.

The present research paper aims to investigate exactly one of these trends—growing female labor force participation. More specifically, it discusses labor rights of women (nationals only) within the GCC. This paper looks at the period from the establishment of the GCC union in 1981 to 2019. The demographic coverage is women nationals of the GCC countries between 18 and 60 years old. The primary aim of this paper is to trace the history of the legal framework and regulations in terms of employment status and wage rates of GCC female nationals and how these rights have evolved in the past 38 years.

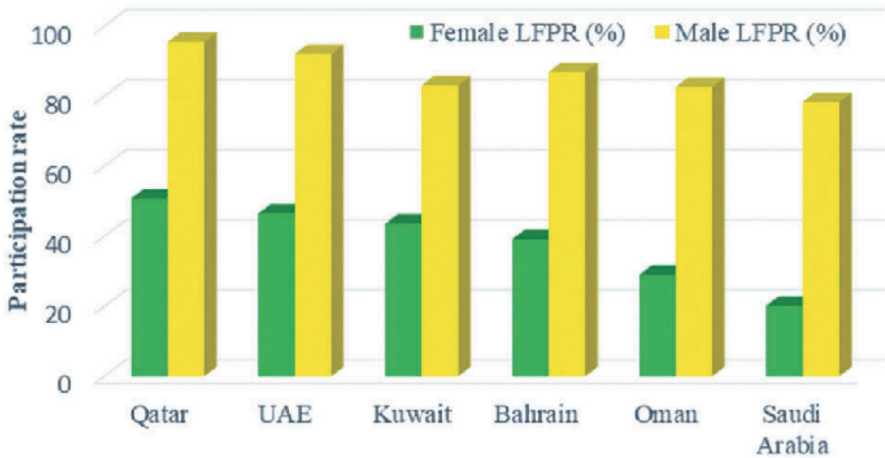
Between 1981 and 2019, women’s participation in the labor force doubled in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain; it nearly tripled in the UAE and Oman. The gender gap in the labor participation rate is the widest in Saudi Arabia and the narrowest in Kuwait and Qatar.<sup>1</sup> According to the national employment trends in GCC countries, the participation of female nationals in the workforce is 44% in the UAE, 33% in Bahrain, and 16% in Saudi Arabia. Qatar women’s participation is 36%, according to the data from 2019.

Kuwait was the first of the six GCC countries that tried to foster women’s participation in the workforce and involve them equally in political life<sup>2</sup> with the amendment of Election Law No. 35/1962 in 2005, which granted women the right to vote and run for office, while Saudi Arabia still showed lower trends in this direction. According to a study conducted by Rakan Alharbi in 2015, “The religious leaders called in Saudi Arabia the ulema, and these religious leaders recommend rules based on their interpretations of Islamic Shari’a law.” The law, until September 2011, stated that only men aged 30 years and older were allowed to participate in the Consultative Assembly, while the women were prohibited from participation. In September 2011, King Abdullah changed the law, allowing up to

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1 The GCC states can be classified into three categories in terms of female labor force participation (FLFP; Figure 1). The first category involves those countries that are characterized by a “moderate” percentage of women’s participation in the labor market. This category includes only Kuwait, which has the highest female participation in the labor market (47%). The second category involves Qatar and Bahrain with relatively limited rates of women’s participation in the labor market, accounting for approximately 35% of all working-age females. The third and final category consists of three countries (Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE), which is characterized by a low FLFP rate. Shawkyy Mansour, “Modernization and Female Labour Force Participation in Oman: Spatial Modelling of Local Variations.” *Taylor & Francis Online* (2020).

2 Marwa Shalaby, *Women’s Political Representation in Kuwait: An Untold Story*, A Report by the Women’s Rights in the Middle East Program (Kuwait: James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University, 2015).



**Figure 1.** Gender gap in the labor force participation rate (LFPR) in GCC countries. Source: Mansour 2020.

30 women to be active participants within the Consultative Assembly because many Saudi citizens were against the violations of women’s rights in Saudi Arabia. Some of these trends are legal ambiguities and clash between existing and newly enacted laws, as well as between negative social and cultural dimensions in gender equality and women’s rights.<sup>3</sup> Even though a positive start was made in 2011 by ensuring a partial role for Saudi women in political and social life, the Kingdom is still considered at international and regional levels the least eager to embrace positive changes towards women empowerment.

Nevertheless, with regards to the promotion of Islamic religion and the social, traditional, and cultural understandings about equal gender participation, the percentage of female nationals involved in the labor force has grown statistically, with positive legislative initiation in some GCC states.<sup>4</sup>

There are a number of reasons for the increased level of women’s participation in the workforce across the GCC countries. These include an increased number of women entering higher education—more women are graduating from universities and entering different positions; and are subject to changing trends in fertility and marriage, with globalization and the continued Western influence in the region that present concepts such as a nuclear family model, women empowerment, and women involvement. In addition, new patterns of consumption and increased economic need at the household level, as well as the greater availability of public sector jobs, also play a role. According to a study

3 Rakan Alharbi, *Women’s Rights in Saudi Arabia: Example of Political Life and Employment* (King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, 2015), 14.

4 Gail Buttorff, Bozena Welborne, and Nawra al-Lawati, “Measuring Female Labor Force Participation,” *Baker Institute for Public Policy* (2018), 1–6.

conducted in Bahrain, urbanization, globalization, and the economic growth of the Arabian Peninsula have influenced women's role (mostly in Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar), who have started to contribute to the household equally as men.

There is also another very important reason that is related to political and social movements, i.e., the "Arab Spring,"<sup>5</sup> in proclaiming rights, all of which have played a critical role in shaping the demand for female performance.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR WOMEN LABOR RIGHTS IN QATAR, BAHRAIN, SAUDI ARABIA, THE UAE, OMAN, AND KUWAIT

The labor rights of GCC women nationals have significantly progressed since the establishment of the cooperation union in May 1981. A research conducted between 1981 and 2019 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) showed that the number of GCC women nationals in employment has grown with every legal and social change enacted within the member states. One of these significant historical moments that transformed the whole Arab world was the Arab Spring (end of 2010), which attracted international and regional attention to three important issues within the MENA region: insufficiency of a knowledge-based society (i.e. equity and empowerment of women in education, greater number of educated citizens, equal educational rights for both genders, and access to education), indigence in political freedom and democracy (for instance, Saudi Arabia still does not consider women as equal citizens and prevents them from equally participating in political life), and women's empowerment (i.e. equity and rights in labor and social laws that serve both genders).<sup>6</sup>

The effect of the Arab Spring on women is a complex phenomenon that led to many social and political changes in the MENA region. The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy uprisings that enveloped several Muslim countries, including Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Bahrain. The profound impact on the domestic political, economic, and security dynamics in the six GCC countries was also apparent, and as a result, legal and social changes were also applied in women empowerment and rights.<sup>7</sup>

A good example for women's empowerment and promotion of equality in employment is Bahrain. Bahrain has the longest history of women's movements in the Gulf region<sup>8</sup> compared with the other five states. Article 12 of Bahrain's Constitution clearly asserts equal rights and opportunities for all employees regardless of gender. Nevertheless, there is still a practice of discrimination in the workplace, and women are denied senior positions

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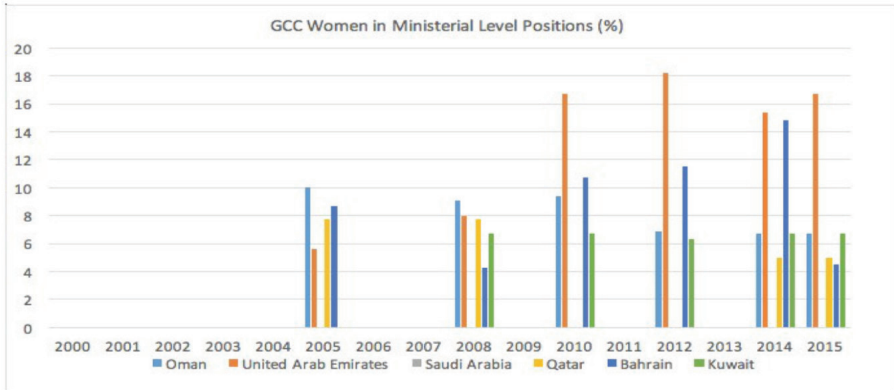
5 May Seikali and Khawla Mattar, *The Silent Revolution: The Arab Spring and the Gulf States* (Berlin, Germany: Gerlach Press, 2014).

6 UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report (AHDR)*, United Nations Human Development Programme, 2011.

7 Seikali and Mattar, *The Silent Revolution*.

8 Sabika Muhammad al-Najjar, "The Feminist Movement in the Gulf," *Al-Raida*, no. 100 (Winter 2003), 68–11.

in both private and public sectors, such as taking ministerial positions (Figure 2).<sup>9</sup> According to the study “Women and Gender in the Middle East and North Africa: Mapping the Field and Addressing Policy Dilemmas at the Post-2011 Juncture,” irrespective of the given rights for voting or available legal labor norms in terms of women’s rights to run for office but lacking a quota system, it becomes much more difficult for women to take a place in the parliament as, for example, in the case of Kuwait where nationals of the country were one of the first with representation in the parliament.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 3.** GCC women in ministerial positions. Source: World Bank.

Labor laws in most of the GCC countries prohibit discrimination against women; however, discrimination remains systemic for leadership positions and in certain sectors in the corporate and political spheres such as high management or political leadership positions. Although women do hold positions in the government and in the private sector, the percentage of women appointed for high management posts remains underrepresented.

In an attempt to break the gender discrimination and/or present international compliance with human rights and women empowerment as a result of post-Arab Spring, King Hamad Bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain appointed a small number of loyalist women for government positions. As of December 2013, there were three female elected ministers in Bahrain: Mai

9 *Women in Business and Management: Gaining Momentum in the Middle East and North Africa: Regional Report*, International Labour Organization (Beirut: ILO, 2016), [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms\\_446101.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_446101.pdf); Knowledge Group, *GCC Women in the Workforce: Status, Challenges, Aspirations: Research Findings, Analysis, and Recommendations*. Knowledge Group (Abu Dhabi: 2018). [https://www.knowledgegroup.co/en-us/ResearchInsights/Publication/WhitePapers/Documents/KG\\_Women%20in%20the%20workforce%20research\\_UAE\\_SM.pdf](https://www.knowledgegroup.co/en-us/ResearchInsights/Publication/WhitePapers/Documents/KG_Women%20in%20the%20workforce%20research_UAE_SM.pdf); OECD, *Better Skills, Better Jobs, and Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Education and Skills Policies for the United Arab Emirates* (2015), <https://www.oecd.org/education/A-Strategic-Approach-to-Education-and%20Skills-Policies-for-the-United-Arab-Emirates.pdf>

10 Katerina Dalacoura, “Women and Gender in the Middle East and North Africa: Mapping the Field and Addressing Policy Dilemmas at the Post-2011 Juncture,” *MENARA Final Reports*, 3 (Barcelona: 2019).

Al-Khalifa, Minister of Culture; Fatima Al-Blooshi, Minister of Human Rights and Social Development; and Samira Rajab, Minister of State for Information Affairs.

However, the gap in gender discrimination between some of the Gulf countries is still a cultural and social phenomenon, not legislative lagging. For example, Oman's labor law norms proclaim equality with respect to job opportunities for both genders. Moreover, in Article 12 from "The Social Principles" of Royal Decree Number 101/1996, gender-based discrimination in the labor sector is prohibited.

However, Kuwait is even more liberal in terms of gender labor equality. The first promulgation of equality in labor rights was in 1959, with the Amiri Decree No. 43 in 1960. As one of the most progressive member states of the GCC, Kuwait has enhanced its employment policies in terms of gender sensitivity and stated that all Kuwaiti citizens (regardless of their gender) are entitled to equal employment.<sup>11</sup>

Similar to Kuwait, the UAE labor law does not treat female nationals differently but as equal citizens.<sup>12</sup> Emirati women are entitled to the same wages and maternity benefits compared to their male counterparts, but the legislator has enforced some employment limitations (with exceptions for some professions such as working in healthcare and administrative and technical positions) for employers in terms of night work and strenuous jobs.

Unlike the positive legislative performance of Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE in labor, promoting gender equality at the workplace, and the same pay rate for all women and men as per legislative decrees, Article 93 from the Qatar Labor Law can be considered exhibiting a gender gap in the legislation. The norm mandates that women and men are entitled to receive equal payment only if they perform the same work. The legislation has left this inequality gap even though reforms were made in legislation in 2004.<sup>13</sup> This norm promotes gender-based inequality against women. It may be that either gap was left in the legislation unconsciously, not realizing the grammatical structure of the norm, or it is believed that women are not able to deal with the same workload as men.

Similar to Qatar, in Saudi Arabia, where the gender gap in female force involvement has the highest negative rates,<sup>14</sup> some positive movement has been made. The new labor law enacted in 2005 proclaimed that every "citizen has the right to work"<sup>15</sup> by virtue of the

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11 Article 51, *Law No. 6 of the year 2010 (Kuwait Labour Law)*: "a worker (any) will get complete end of service compensation at the end of the contract period"; or wage rates related norms: "in terms of performance of the same type of work women are paid same rates as men."

12 "Chapter II: Employment of Workers, Juveniles and Women Section I Employment of Workers," *Federal Law No. (8) of 1980*: "Work is a right of the United Arab Emirates Nationals. Others may not be employed in the United Arab Emirates except as provided for in this Law and its executive orders."

13 "Law No. 14 of the Year 2004," *Qatar Labor Law*: "A working woman shall be paid a wage equivalent to the wage payable to a man if she performs the same work and shall be availed of the same opportunities of training and promotion."

14 The World Bank provides data for Saudi Arabia from 1990 to 2018. The average value for Saudi Arabia during that period was 17.59% with a minimum of 14.21% in 1992 and a maximum of 23.37% in 2018.

15 "Article 3," *General Provision of the Royal Decree M/51*: "Work is the right of every citizen. No one else may exercise such right unless the conditions provided for in this Law are fulfilled. All citizens are equal in the right to work."

Saudi Arabian national citizenship law. Women in Saudi Arabia were previously forbidden from voting in elections or being elected to any political office; however, in 2011, King Abdullah allowed women to vote in the 2015 local elections and to be appointed to the Consultative Assembly. In 2011, there were more female university graduates in Saudi Arabia than male, and female literacy was estimated to be 91%, which was still lower than male literacy but far higher than 40 years earlier.<sup>16</sup> In 2017, King Salman allowed women to access government services such as education, healthcare, and driving without the need for consent from a guardian. In 2018, the percentage of women in the workforce doubled in the GCC according to a Human Rights Development Report issued in the same year.

However, contrary to the law, very often there are cultural rather than legal constraints that constitute women's principle barrier to entering employment or, if employed, to receive equal opportunities for professional development and promotion.

## EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND EDUCATION OF WOMEN IN BAHRAIN, THE UAE, QATAR, SAUDI ARABIA, KUWAIT, AND OMAN

In the past few decades, the standard of education has been a key factor preventing women's progress. Despite the high budgetary allocation for educational systems and free education, almost 9 out of 10 students (50% of which are females) would first have to take one or two years of foundation-level preparation courses to succeed in university.<sup>17</sup>

A study conducted in 2009 by the European University Institute (EUI)<sup>18</sup> shows that education in humanities and religious studies do not adequately prepare GCC nationals to compete against expatriates for jobs in various sectors in the economy. Inadequate education, together with the social and cultural boundaries of traditional Gulf societies, have put constraints on women's personal and professional development. The tendency in job preferences among Gulf women often dominates their educational choices in vocationally oriented subjects and limits them to jobs that do not favor high management or leadership skills to enter managerial or political positions.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the persistent deficit in women's rights in Gulf societies, notable progress has been achieved in some states during the last decade. Legislations have been reformed and women have been given opportunities for professional development. Gulf states

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16 According to Ernst and Young's calculation, GCC governments have committed US\$27 billion to boost their educational sectors. Apart from these major investments, they have also "bet on economic diversification" through other means. Saudi Arabia, for example, invested US\$3.5 billion in Uber Technologies Inc. to modernize their modern infrastructures and create employment for local populations. <https://www.naseba.com/who-we-are/our-blog/ma-activity-tech-investment-gcc-headersdiversification-takes-centre-stage/>.

17 The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, *Education and the Requirements of the GCC Labour Market* (Abu Dhabi: 2016).

18 Bechir Lamine, *Towards an Arab Higher Education Space: International Challenges and Societal Responsibilities*, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States (Beirut: UNESCO, 2010).

19 Steffen Hertog, *National Employment, Migration and Education in the GCC* (Gerlach Press, 2013).

undertook the initiative to modify their labor laws in a direction towards gender equality. Some countries, such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE, succeeded more than others. However, Qatar and Saudi Arabia still need to perform in this direction in terms of balancing the involvement of both genders equally in the workforce, standardizing privileges, and access to equal professional development and equal wage rates.

Curiously, in the Gulf countries, female participation in the labor market displays sector limitations and paradoxes. Such limitations can be seen in the political realm,<sup>20</sup> although some of the GCC member states have shown positive changes in this direction (Bahrain, UAE, and Kuwait).<sup>21</sup> In 2005, for the first time, women were permitted to run for office in parliamentary elections in Kuwait. Bahrain had, for the first time, three female ministers in 2004 and 2005. The first female judge was appointed in the UAE in 2019.<sup>22</sup> In Oman, the achievements were in a different direction, changing the law concerning testimony.<sup>23</sup> This gave Omani women equal rights in their work dispute statements.

Legal changes in Saudi Arabia and Qatar came about 10 years later than the other GCC countries. The changes in women's equal participation in social and economic life influenced by the Arab Spring in 2011 saw the first positive legislative changes for Saudi women nationals in 2017 with the amendments of some laws related to freedom for women by the current Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Women have become more visible in public life with the changes applied in mobility.<sup>24</sup>

The political disagreement between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in 2017 has become a reason for the constant competition between the two states in terms of development. This political situation has influenced the continuing positive impact on the development and empowerment of women in the two member states. In the agendas of "Vision 2030," both Saudi Arabia and Qatar foresee changes that can positively impact their development.<sup>25</sup>

## GENDER PERCEPTIONS IN WAGE RATES WITHIN THE GCC'S LABOR MARKET

Persistent wage gap within the GCC's labor market is one of the main issues identified in women's equitable participation in the workforce.<sup>26</sup> Wage gaps are continuous between male and female employees, in both public and private sectors.

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20 The amendment of Kuwait Election *Law No. 35/1962* in 2005.

21 Gail Buttorff, Bozeno Welborne, and Nawra al-Lawati, "Measuring Female Labor Force Participation," *Baker Institute for Public Policy* (2018), 1-6.

22 His Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan issued Federal Decree No. 27 of 2019 appointing two female judges at the Federal Judiciary.

23 Sultanate of Oman, *Royal Decree 68 of 2008*, Muscat.

24 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "Royal Decree of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman 10/10/1439AH-24/06/2018," Riyadh.

25 General Secretariat for Development Planning, "Qatar National Vision 2030," (Doha: 2008); Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030," Riyadh.

26 World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018: Insight Report* (Geneva: World Economic Forum), [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2018.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf)



In the whole GCC region, particularly in Bahrain and Kuwait, families have started to rely more on women's financial support than men's support. Women have thus a greater voice and have gained greater respect in the family.<sup>27</sup> Government efforts to reduce dependence on foreign labor in the Arab Gulf states have provided poor, less educated women with increased job opportunities.<sup>28</sup>

Bahrain's case for wage rates is an example of relatively small differences in terms of pay rates based on gender.<sup>29</sup> Women and men in the public sector earn almost the same on average (BD 781 for men and BD 758 for women), whereas in the private sector, the difference is up to 32% in favor of men. The difference might be a matter of gap in legislation or violation of rules from employers based on legal ignorance or cultural gender-based perceptions.

Kuwait is also an example of significant differences in wage rates based on gender, especially in the private sector, where wages of men are 63% higher than of women.<sup>30</sup> Despite the slightly more liberal and long-standing labor law, Kuwait still performs negatively in terms of differences in wages. Men and women employed in the public sector have a 41% difference in favor of men. The average monthly salary of Kuwaiti men in the government sector was KD 1,807 per month in the first quarter of 2019, compared to KD 1,279 for Kuwaiti women.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of Qatari males, their average monthly salary was QR 31,405 (QR 7,851.25 for 41 working hours per week) while Qatari females earn QR 23,223 (QR 5,805.75 for 38 hours per week). At the level of occupation, the highest average monthly wages are for "legislators, senior officials, and managers" with an average of QR 33,000, followed by "specialists" with QR 24,000. In addition, women's representation in terms of numbers is far lower than that of men in Qatar.<sup>32</sup>

In July 2019, when the announcement of the second periodic report of Qatar was made, submitted under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Qatar representative HE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Sultan bin Saad al-Muraikhi presented the development of Qatar in terms of the legislative, institutional, policy, and strategy progress towards strengthening and promoting the human rights infrastructure. Regardless of the developments made by Qatar in the past few years, several recommendations, including work to strengthen national mechanisms,

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27 Khalid Al-Azri, *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Nadje Al-Ali, "Gendering the Arab Spring," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5, no. 1 (2012): 26–31; Sarah Kelly, "Recent Gains and New Opportunities for Women's Rights in the Gulf Arab States," *Freedom House Report, Women's Rights in the Middle East and North* (2009).

28 *Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Portrait of Progress* (UAE, 2008).

29 Mitchell Belfer, *Fighting the Gender Wage Gap: The Bahrain Experience*, World Economics (2018), [https://www.worldeconomics.com/Blogs/Fighting%20the%20Gender%20Wage%20Gap%20The%20Bahrain%20Experience\\_b0694078-97d9-40d0-9a5a-76bbccc7ca24.blog](https://www.worldeconomics.com/Blogs/Fighting%20the%20Gender%20Wage%20Gap%20The%20Bahrain%20Experience_b0694078-97d9-40d0-9a5a-76bbccc7ca24.blog)

30 Central Statistics Bureau, *Statistics for 2018*, Kuwait.

31 Central Statistics Bureau, *Statistics for 2019*, Kuwait.

32 State of Qatar, *Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics* (2016).

deal with women's issues and the continuation of the country's efforts to review and amend laws and legislations in order to conform to the provisions of the convention. Qatar is one of the countries where pre-existing laws still contradict the positive amendments, which the new policies tried to emphasize in terms of women empowerment and equal involvement in the social, economic, and political life.

While Qatar is making an effort to achieve equity in employment for women, UAE has already a clause in the labor law, in which Article 32 states: "A working woman shall be entitled to the same wage as that of a working man, if she does the same work." The UAE does not have a specific act that regulates this Article, but the norm is assumed as relatively applicable for all related laws in employment rights within the country, regardless of gender. Discrimination is not permitted in any form, for any reason, and under any circumstance, and actions based on discriminative practices are criminalized beyond one's strength, with fines and possible imprisonment.<sup>33</sup>

In Saudi Arabia, development and increase of the female workforce went through big changes between 2011 and 2017, which are still in progress. Saudi women are in the 141st place in the gender pay gap worldwide.<sup>34</sup> They receive 56% less salary than their male counterparts. One of the possible reasons for this, like Qatar, is the fact that the country has not stated minimum wage rates for the private sector, which has the highest percentage of female occupation. Minimum wages have been established only in the public sector, but Saudi women do not or rarely take position in this sector.

The promise made by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to invest in education and equal opportunities for men and women as part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is thought-provoking for possible changes, which have emanated with the Arab Spring that started to transform the region.

Although Saudi Arabia is building upon its promise for social and legislative development in the field of wage rates, a small member of the GCC (Oman) has already succeeded in this field. Unlike Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the Omani legislation has regulated its wage rates. Oman's minimum wage is RO 225 per month (USD 592) plus an allowance of RO 100 per month (USD 263) for citizens.<sup>35</sup> The Sultanate of Oman is an excellent example for law enforcement of guarantees for equal wage payment for women and men. The gap between the two genders is minimum when considering the rest of the Gulf member states.

Officially, women and men are supposed to receive equal payment for the same job, but women's upward mobility is quite restricted and senior positions are mainly held by

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33 United Arab Emirates, "Article 6 Decree Law No. 2 "On Combatting Discrimination and Hatred," (Abu Dhabi: 2015): "Any person, who commits any act of discrimination of any form by any means of expression or by any other means, shall be sentenced to imprisonment for a period not less than five years, and by a fine not less than five hundred thousand dirhams and not exceeding one million dirhams or either one of these two penalties."

34 The Global Gender Gap Report 2018.

35 Sultanate of Oman, *National Centre for Statistics & Information*, (Oman: 2017). <https://www.ncsi.gov.om/Pages/AllIndicators.aspx>

men.<sup>36</sup> The cultural perception that women are more emotional than men and better suited to household responsibilities remains a serious obstacle for ambitious women looking for executive and management positions.

While the analyses made on labor laws within the GCC's member states clearly state that women (GCC nationals only) do have the legal status and right to work, the traditional thinking and cultural prevalence of patriarchal societies within the GCC states are still the main obstacles for the professional and personal development of women.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The main research approach was in the direction of mixed methodology of both qualitative and quantitative data processes. For the purpose of building the analytical part of the present study, document and book reviews were conducted. The statistical information presented was analyzed mainly from graphs and diagrams from World Bank sources, as well as from other published studies, which collated comparative information on women's employment between 1981 and 2019 within the GCC countries.

The results of the mixed research approach conducted involved reviewing around 15 legal documents translated into English, among which are six main labor legal acts of the countries: the Constitutions of Oman and Kuwait; the legislative royal decrees of Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia; and two Visions of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The statistical approach was to collate and compare data from the World Bank website and the statistical bureaus of Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. No such data was available for the other three countries.

The literature review involved analyzing books related to employment and educational requirements, the history of women empowerment in the Gulf countries, as well as articles and journals related to the movements of the Arab Spring in the GCC. Important sources for building a strong analysis related to women labor rights were the review of legal reports, articles, and suggestion policies by international bodies. The external reports were mainly from organizations such as the European Council, the Human Rights Watch, and the ILO. Another planned source collection was to conduct research within the official websites of the governmental bodies regulating labor in the six GCC countries and to review them. The number of used resources included books, articles, official legal documents, official internal and external reports, and official country websites.

The main obstacle foreseen in this research study was the language barrier. Most of the legal and official documents of the public regulative bodies within the GCC are in Arabic. Very few of the sources have been translated into English and are for public use.

This research paper aims to emphasize the importance of the involvement of women in the labor market and the development trends in labor legislations, as well as to initiate thoughts for more policy changes and social and cultural review of the current problems that the GCC women nationals face in employment.

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36 State of Qatar, "The Labour Law No. 3 of 1962," (Doha: 2019). <https://almeezan.qa/LawView.aspx?opt&LawID=2599&language=en>

## CONCLUSION

Socially and culturally, the Gulf region is changing rapidly. Many of the states acquired wealth during the 1960s and the 1970s due to rising oil revenues,<sup>37</sup> which enabled the economic development and the establishment of states with free education, healthcare, and social services. However, persistent (and differing) gender gaps in economic and political participation illustrate the different stages in transition within the region. The gradual enhancement of women's position is the "product" of social and economic change as well as a factor that enforces the need for continuation of social development that pays dedicated attention to the position of women.

In some of the Gulf member states, such as Kuwait, women have been actively contributing to Islamic identity politics<sup>38</sup> by embracing Islamic dress and rigorous morality and traditional customs while pursuing education and careers. The process of globalization in the Gulf region has resulted in an increase in women's economic participation. A significant role in women's development was also played by the recommendations from international stakeholders, which emphasized equal human rights and the need for changing legislations (or social and cultural norms) in order to meet the needs of women and to empower them.

The investigated legal resources showed that the legal employment framework in the GCC countries can be a matter of social and cultural perceptions in legislation and does not respond to the high qualification and skillsets upon graduation that women nationals might have. The gap in legislation or contradiction of pre-existing norms reflects on equal women labor participation.

In summary, we can conclude that women's issues within the GCC countries have increasingly become a public issue, and a discourse on gender equality is continuously developing in all fields.

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37 UNDP, "Chapter 17: From the Home to Society," *Arab Human Development Report 2005* (Amman: National Press, 2015), 5.

38 Natalan J. DeLong-Bas, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

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