



# **The Status of women in the Arab Gulf Countries**

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It is a great honor to address such a distinguished gathering under the dome of the German Parliament.

In the next few minutes I will try to give description of women status in the Gulf Region, and their economic participation.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in The Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet which are the sources from which every Muslim woman derives her rights and duties. Islam established a woman's equality in her humanity with men; neither gender can be superior because it would be a contradiction to equality.

Islam also, recognizes and fosters the natural differences between men and women despite their equality. This in no way diminishes either's efforts or benefits. God will reward both sexes equally for the value of their work, through, it may not necessarily be the same activity.

**Political Rights** A right given to Muslim women by God 1400 years ago is the right to vote. On any public matter, a woman may voice her opinion and participate in politics. This established the right of women to select their leader and publicly declare so. Finally, Islam does not forbid a woman from holding important positions in government which suit her role as a woman. Abdurrahman Ibn Affan consulted many women before he recommended Uthman Ibn Affan to be the Caliph.

**Economic Rights:** Muslim women have the privilege to earn money, the right to own property, to enter into legal contracts and to manage all of her assets in any way she pleases. She can run her own business and no one has any claim on her earnings, including her husband.

**Civil Rights:** In Islam, a woman has the basic freedoms of choice and expression based on recognition of her individual personality. First, she is free to choose her religion and Women are encouraged in Islam to contribute their opinions and ideas. There are many traditions of the Prophet which indicate that women would pose questions directly to him and offer their opinions concerning religion, economics and social matters.

While women in the beginning of Islam enjoyed equal rights and full participation in the economy, politics. However, women in the Gulf countries had been influenced by society's traditions. Their economic participation and their status position are become low and weak in comparisons with their life at the begging of Islam. Nevertheless, Gulf women have played a role in for as long as these societies have existed, through their effective role in the family and in their tribes, and supplementing the family income with a little local trading or through weaving and handicrafts and agricultural work and in some cases fighting beside their men.

Nowadays, women in the Gulf are at the forefront of the economic life of their societies, in the labor force, in politics, in civil organizations, and, in that most crucial area of life, in economics.

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### **Gender Reforms**

The past three decades have witnessed steadily increasing women participation through measures to increase social, economic and political equity, and broader access to fundamental human rights, through improvements in, work and education

The higher political leaderships in the Gulf play a major role in supporting women to attain their rights and improve their status and role in the society.

The Constitutions of all the six Gulf countries, states all the Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles for women.

In the last three decades, there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. for their participation in labor force and economic activities.

Gulf countries also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The status of Gulf women varies from nation to nation and has evolved differently in many countries, but it is fair to say that in recent years, Gulf women achievement is evident. True, traditions keeps Gulf women at times away from the "focal point" of cultural, political and financial circles, but step-by-step, women of all ages have been playing a greater role in all aspects of society, enabling the creation of further opportunities for the younger female generation.

Two Gulf women already appointed in the UN, Ms. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid from Saudi Arabia, is the UNFPA Executive Director, UN Under-Secretary-General. . In 2006 Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, a pioneering lawyer and women's rights advocate from Bahrain has been elected U.N. General Assembly president, the third woman in history and the first from the Middle.

In all Gulf countries women held a ministerial position, . Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi, as an economics and planning minister. Dr. Masuma Al Mubarak was appointed as as minister of planning and administrative development. Sheikha Ahmad Al-Mahmoud, took office as the Minister of Education. Dr Nada Haffadh the Health Minister in Dr Fatima Al Balooshi, Minister of Social Affairs. Several women appointed as assistant undersecretaries in Saudi Arabia. In all the Gulf countries there are women in the Bank's Board of Directors. For example, The general assembly of the Saudi-Dutch Bank elected Mrs. Lubna Al-Alyyan as a member of the Bank's Board of Directors on December 1, 2004. She is the chief executive officer of Olayan Corporation and a member of the Arab Business Council,

In Saudi Arabia, Six women are advisors to Majlis Al-Shura, a 150 member national consultative council appointed by the King. This is a step towards women's public participation that could serve as the basis for appointing women as members of Majlis Al-Shura and more appointment in public positions. King Abdullah, has made public statements in support of increasing women's role in public life and many legislations were created to open more economic opportunity for women in the last four years There have been growing debates (inside majlas alsura, National Dialog, public lectures and in the Saudi media) about issues that are of concern of the people. Above all, Saudis are becoming far readier —to talk many reforms issues including women's issue.

## Population:

In the latest estimation of the GCC population, The GCC –has a total population of about 36 million, one-third of them foreigners. Women constitute 48% of total population because of the presence of non- citizen

Table 1: No. Of Population According To Nationality(July 2006)

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar*	Saudi Arabia	UAE	Total
Male	389592	1459949	1113640	576384	14763069	1530998	19833632
Female	308993	958444	1380589	308975	12256662	1071715	16285378
total	698585	2418393	2494229	885359	27029731	2602713	36129010
Female Percentage	<b>44.23%</b>	<b>39.63%</b>	<b>55.35%</b>	<b>34.90%</b>	<b>45.35%</b>	<b>41.18%</b>	<b>48.08*</b>
* calculated by weighted average according to the population size.							

## The economic participation

Government in the Gulf has follow a notion that their societies need to see women, less as passive recipients of help, and more as dynamic promoters of social transformation, achieving that through education, employment and ownership of business and have influence and ability to control their environment and contribute to their courtiers economic development.

<b>Table 1: Female Labor Force Participation in Gulf States By National. 2004</b>							
	UAE	Bahrain	Saudi Arabia (2002)	Oman	Qatar	Kuwait	Total GCC
Non-Citizen Female		38	435.5		10.4	283	766.9
Citizen Female	421	39.5	465.3	46.83	16.3	119.6	1108.53
Non-Citizen male		161.1	2657.4	447.22	39.1	1052	4356.82
Citizen male	2310	101.2	2683.4	144.46	21.6	179.6	5440.26

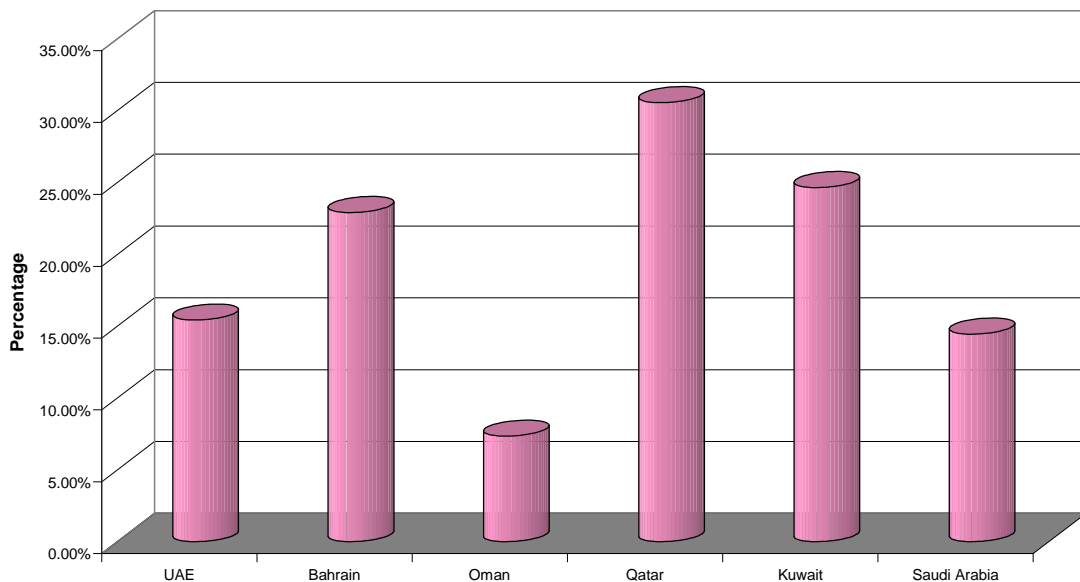
Total Labor Force	2731	339.9	6241.6	638.19	87.4	1634.2	766.9
	15.42	22.90	14.43	7.33	30.55	24.64%	19.2%

According to the data, the average percentage of female participation in all six countries is 19.2% which means one fifth of total labor force are female. However it varies from one country to another where the highest in Qatar and the lowest in Oman. Also, women concentrated in government job which represent more of job security and higher income.

Women are primarily employed in education, health care, and civil service jobs. However, with the enlargement of private sector and with more chance for employment in that sector, changes in status of women has been developing, where more and more women working in that sector. In Saudi Arabia, the kingdom's labor ministry recently set up a working group to study how more private sector jobs could be created for women.

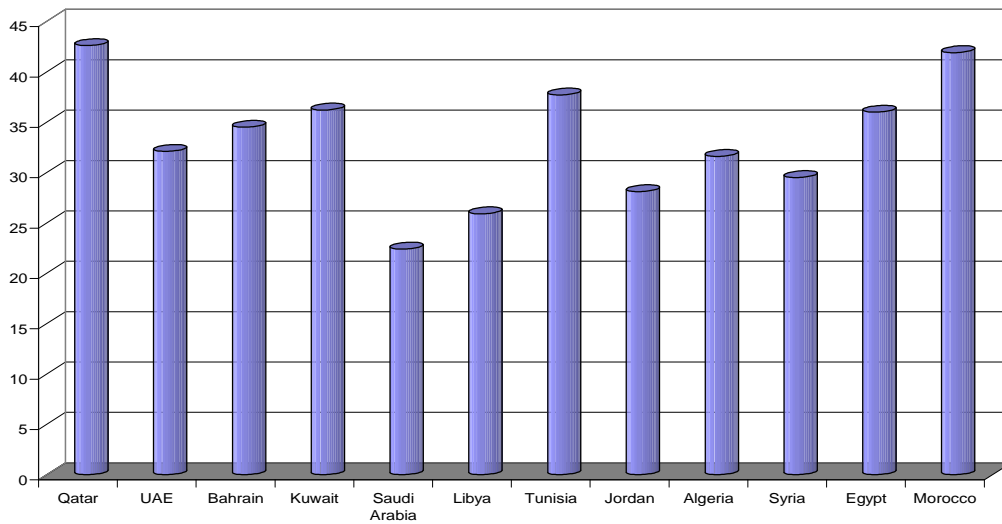
Female in Gulf States compete not only with citizen male but with Non-Citizen male who constitute a large percentage of labor force in these countries. So, governments across the Gulf looking to the private sector to provide more jobs for their growing populations.

**Female Labor Participation in the Gulf Countries 2004**

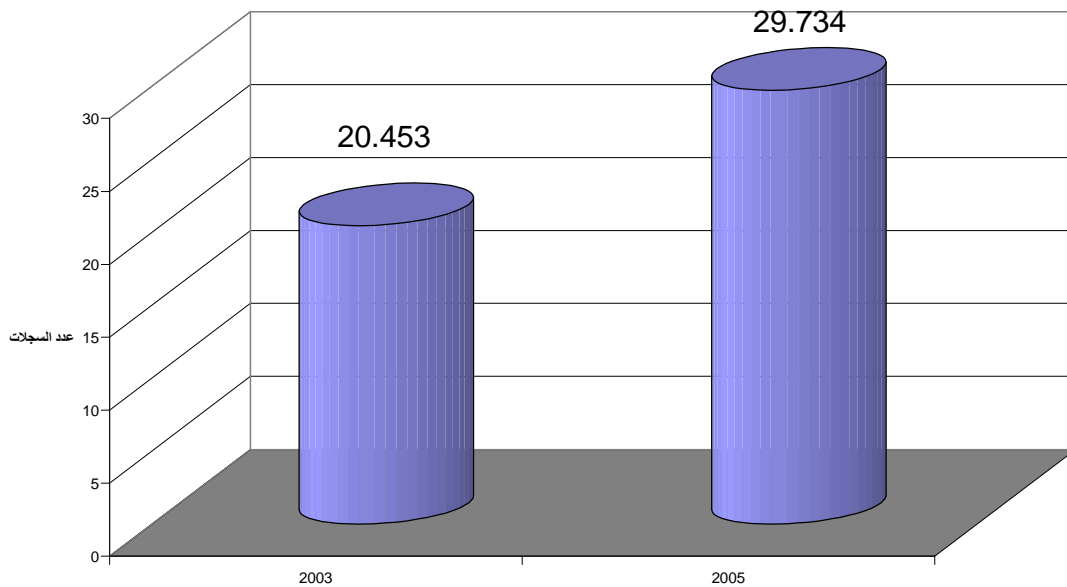


women in the Gulf are active in the economic domain such as investment, in business, agriculture ..etc. Where the average of women participation in Economic activities labor force and business is 25 Percent. Where for cha example

**Women Participation in Economic Activities  
Labor Force and Business in Gulf Countries and other Arab Countries**



**Number of Female Business in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

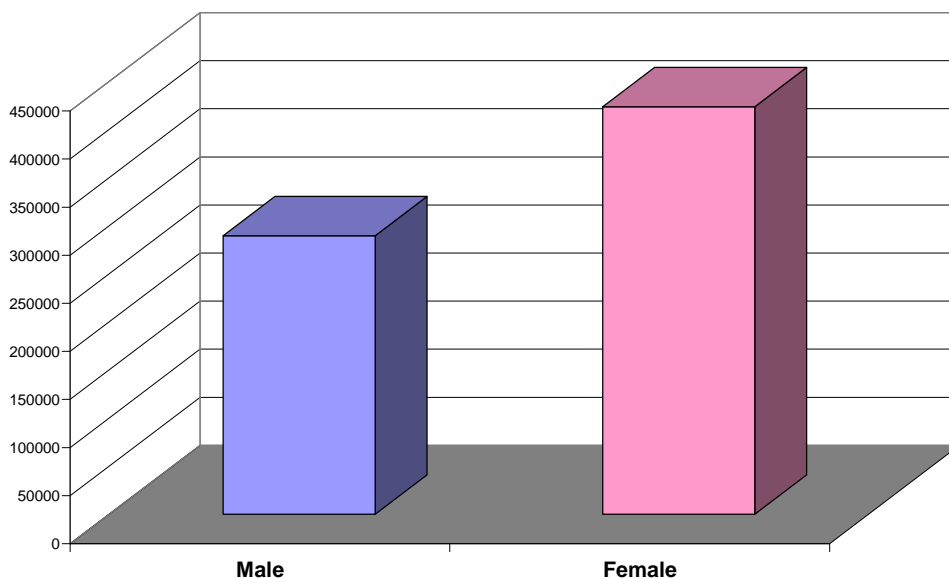


According to ministry of commerce, approximately 29.734 businesses are owned by women, an increase from 29.453 in 2003. In addition, females own more than 10% of the bank mutual funds

## Educational attainment

Progress on bridging the gender gap in social indicators has been impressive in Gulf Countries, mainly because of heavy public sector investments in education and health sectors, from which women have benefited significantly.

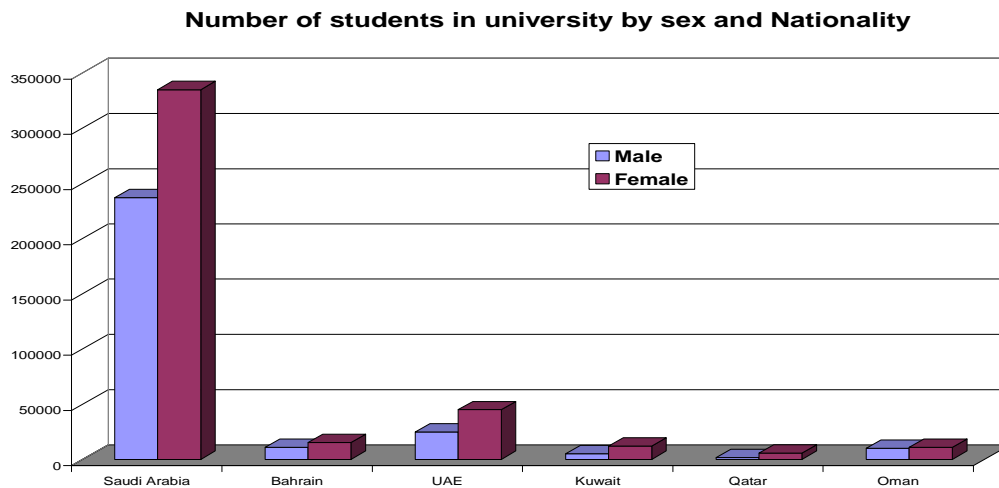
**Total University Students by Sex in the Six Gulf Countries 2004**



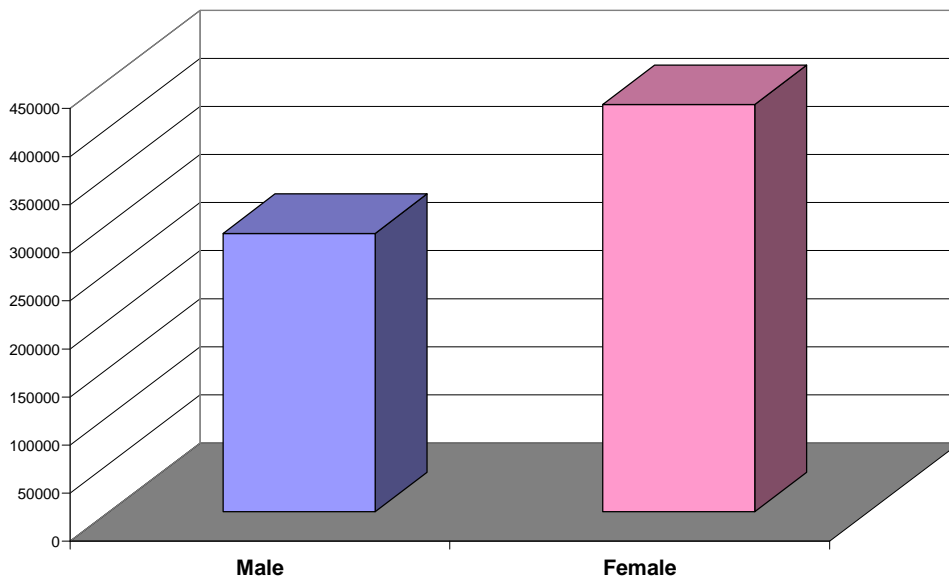
For the last several decades there has been tremendous expansion in the educational facilities in all the six Gulf countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). The girls are consistently coming out on top and, with a declared government policy guaranteeing Gulf women equal rights in education, as enshrined in the Government Laws.

Gulf countries has made substantial gains in the education of women. Statistics show that girls are equal to boys in tertiary, secondary and primary level of education in Gulf countries.. and 60% of all university students in the six states of the Gulf are women..

Female in the Gulf, with education of comparable quality and content to that given to boys and men, and relevant to existing knowledge and real needs, were able to access jobs, advance within them, participate in, and are represented in government and gain political influence. Moreover, this will prepare the next generation of children for better development. Empirical work has shown, that increase of education and literacy has led to changes in women status in the Gulf.



**Total University Students by Sex in the Six Gulf Countries 2004**



In Gulf States, literacy rate as high as 89.1% in Qatar, 85% in Bahrain, 81.7% in UAE , 71% in Saudi Arabia and 67.2 in Oman women benefit from fairly extensive education. According to world bank data.

**Table : Literacy Rate for six Gulf Countries by sex, in 2004.**

	UAE	Bahrain	Saudi Arabia	Qatar	Kuwait	Oman
Male	76.1	91.9	84.7	89.0	85.1	83.1
Female	81.7	85.0	70.8	89.1	81.7	67.2

Saudi Arabia's priority in educating its citizens is reflected in the share of GDP devoted to education, which has increased more than three-fold over the last thirty years, rising from 3.5% to 9.8% between 1970 and 2002. The main challenge facing the Kingdom is to ensure educational excellence and to equip its youth with needed skills, enabling them to find gainful employment in an increasingly integrated and competitive global economy. From 1975 to 2000, female combined enrolment ratios increased from 36% to 94.5% for primary education; from 4.9% to 88.2% for secondary education; and from 2.5% to 58.0% for tertiary education. These increases in female enrolment ratios are among the highest in the world.

Saudi Arabia ranks amongst the top three countries in the world to have achieved the largest increment in the increase to life expectancy at birth: from an average of 53.9 years in 1970-1975 to 70.9 years in 1995-2000. The Kingdom's record in this respect exceeds that of many Arab States and developing countries, and is not far behind the achievement of the OECD European member states. Today, over 83 percent of Saudis can expect to live longer than 60 years