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Chapter 8

Advancing Women's Empowerment in the Gulf: Pathways, Challenges, and Policy Implications



Ahmed Aref and Angela Fallentine

Abstract This final chapter of the book provides insightful concluding remarks based on the valuable evidence presented on women's empowerment and public policy. It emphasizes the need for evidence-based policies tailored to local values, collaboration between stakeholders, and gender-specific research to achieve sustainable progress in women's empowerment. The chapter examines pathways to increase women's empowerment, identifies challenges that need to be addressed, and offers recommendations for sustained engagement to promote women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf States.

Keywords Women's empowerment · Public policy · Pathways · Challenges · Arab Gulf states · Policy implications

8.1 Breaking Barriers: The Journey Toward Women's Empowerment in the Gulf Region

The importance of empowering women in the Gulf region has been widely recognized as a crucial factor in promoting individual and family well-being, as well as fostering social and economic development. In recent decades, there has been notable progress in expanding women's roles and responsibilities in various contexts, such as education and labor participation. However, despite these advancements, there are still obstacles to overcome in creating and implementing effective policies that can improve the cultural, economic, and political status of women and their families in the Gulf. According to Abousleiman (2021), the implementation of gender policies has had mixed success, often lacking an evidence-based approach to determine when, how, and why policies are effective.

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This book provides valuable conceptual and empirical evidence on women's empowerment and public policy, offering insights for sustained high-level engagement and on-the-ground action in promoting women's empowerment in the Arab Gulf States. In these concluding remarks, we examine pathways to increase women's empowerment in the region, highlighting important advances made to date. We also identify key challenges that continue to impede progress in this area. Finally, we summarize the key findings and discuss policy implications, providing recommendations for future action.

8.2 Revisiting Commitments Toward Women's Empowerment

As women empowerment and gender equality terminologies are contextual and multifaceted, Naguib's provided definition in Chap. 2 illustrates that approaching the topic holistically is an effective means of understanding women's empowerment in the Gulf region. Therefore, the following working definition, adopted in this book, is crucial for conceptual understanding within the context of social and cultural values and practices: "Women's empowerment is a dynamic and multi-faceted process that is rooted in local values, requiring agency, and necessitates the availability of resources to achieve well-being and positive changes both at the individual and social levels."

Women's empowerment has been consistently emphasized in various international conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The UDHR recognizes that human dignity and equal rights are crucial for social development, enhancing the quality of life and freedom (United Nations, 1948, preamble). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) define women's empowerment as the ability for women to have agency in pursuing their life aspirations, achieving their full potential (art. 12), working in full partnership with men (art. 15), and participating fully in all aspects of society through gender-sensitive policy and lawmaking (art. 19). In 2003, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 58/15, which recognized men and women as equal partners and called for measures to provide equal political, economic, social, and educational opportunities for women, as well as evaluating and assessing policies to support mothers and fathers in performing their essential roles. Furthermore, in 2015, the international community committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include significant targets for improving gender equality for women worldwide. These resolutions and goals have urged member states to develop national strategies and action plans outlining how they will implement their commitments to women's advancement.

The commitment to women's empowerment is evident at the national level in many GCC countries. For instance, the Qatar National Vision (2008, pp. 19, 22) outlines that women will play a significant role in all aspects of life, particularly through participation in economic and political decision-making, and the government will

enhance their capabilities and empower them to participate fully in decision-making positions. Additionally, Qatar's first National Development Strategy (2011–2016) aims to “enhance an integrated approach to sound social development capacities and empower them to participate more fully in the political and economic spheres” (p. 28), while the second NDS (2018–2022) emphasizes the need to establish “family-friendly employment practices and encourage gender-sensitive work environments” (p. 175).

Notably, Qatar's various national strategies use the term “women's empowerment” instead of “gender equality.” In the Arab world, the concept of women's empowerment is associated with women's unique roles and responsibilities, equal partnership with men, and working within established gender norms (LiLoia, 2019). Conversely, in the West, gender equality is closely linked to women's empowerment, with the perspective that addressing power imbalances is key to achieving gender equality (UNFPA, 2005). Due to contextual differences, the term “women's empowerment” is sometimes preferred over “gender equality” in the Arab world at large. Regarding gender equality, Smith (1979) explains that “Westerners tend to evaluate the circumstances of Muslim women in terms of ‘progress’ or ‘problems,’ and little understanding can be achieved without attempting to view the male–female relationship from within the Islamic perspective.” Therefore, as discussed by Abdelagafar in Chap. 3, “the Islamic perspective has yet to be adequately elucidated at the global level.”

8.3 Reviewing Progress Toward Women's Empowerment in the GCC

According to the World Bank, Gulf nations have made significant progress in empowering women in recent years. This progress has enabled reforming countries' economies to benefit from the productivity of 50% of their populations. It has also contributed to poverty reduction, sustainable growth, and most importantly, gender equity for women in both the public and private spheres. These positive changes have even had a spillover effect on neighboring countries (Abousleiman, 2021). The Global Gender Gap Report (2022) confirms that there have been considerable advances in the Economic Participation and Opportunity subindex in the region. Subindex scores have increased, with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait showing the greatest improvement. The report also indicates that the Educational Attainment Index has attained a 96.2% gender parity in the region, and the United Arab Emirates has achieved full gender equality in parliamentary representation.

Qatar has taken steps to empower women by introducing a new government policy aimed at improving work-family balance. This policy allows Qatari women to request part-time employment within the “Mawared” human resources system, reflecting the country's significant investment in women's education and employment aspirations, family cohesion, and the positive impact of flexible working hours on women's

participation in the labor market (Qatar Foundation, 2021). These efforts are in line with the data presented by Barbar, Naguib & Abu Hilal in Chap. 5, which further explores the impact of such policies on women's empowerment.

In a similar vein, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) became the first country in the world to transition to a 4.5 workweek in 2021. The government initiative aimed to improve work-family balance, increase productivity, enhance social well-being, strengthen the UAE's economic competitiveness, and advance women's economic empowerment. The results of an evaluation study conducted by the Sharjah Executive Council (SEC, 2023) in 2023 indicate that this initiative has yielded positive outcomes. These include higher levels of job satisfaction (90%), happiness (91%), job performance (90%), mental health improvement (87%), and improved work-family balance (84%).

The Gulf region has made notable progress in various areas that have the potential to improve women's status and remove obstacles to their full and voluntary participation in all aspects of society. As Robinson (2021) points out, promoting cooperation and gender equality between men and women can further strengthen the Gulf's ability to effectively tackle the diverse range of challenges facing the region in the twenty-first century. Such cooperation and equality can pave the way for a more inclusive and prosperous future for all members of Gulf society.

8.4 Advancements in Women's Empowerment in the Gulf Region: Illustrating Examples

Arab Gulf states have implemented various initiatives to empower women, such as the creation of women's councils, governmental organizations, and laws that promote the well-being of women and families. While Langworthy and Naguib in Chap. 7 delve further into this topic, we present below some illustrative examples.

Bahrain: The Kingdom established the Supreme Council for Women on August 22, 2001. The council is chaired by Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka Bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa and comprises at least 16 female public figures who are considered leaders in women's affairs and related activities. The council's main objective is to empower Bahraini women and ensure their inclusion in development programs, while also promoting cohesive family bonds and lives. The council operates under the principle of equal opportunities, fosters competitiveness among Bahraini women, and facilitates lifelong learning. It also promotes legislation and policies aimed at providing diverse opportunities for women to enhance the quality of their lives. As a specialized expert-led organization that supports women's affairs in line with global standards, the council collaborates with relevant institutions to elevate the status of women in Bahrain.¹

Qatar: In the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee on the Advancement of Women, the State of Qatar emphasized its priority

¹ Retrieved from https://www.bahrain.bh/new/en/equality-women_en.html.

on promoting human rights and equal participation of women in the country's sustainable development efforts, as aligned with Qatar National Vision 2030. Qatar has taken significant measures to ensure equal opportunities for women in education, employment, and care, including the highest rate of women's labor force participation, wage equality in the government sector, and the highest rate of female enrollment in universities. Women in Qatar have also achieved success in the highest administrative positions and hold various ministerial and high-ranking positions. Moreover, women's participation as candidates and voters in municipal and Shura Council elections allows them to become effective partners in decision-making processes at the highest levels. Qatar's legislation and policies aimed at achieving work-family balance have contributed significantly to women's empowerment and participation in the public and private sectors.²

Saudi Arabia: In 2019, the Kingdom made significant progress in promoting women's rights, resulting in the largest increase in ranking on the World Bank Group's Women, Business and the Law report compared to the previous year. The reforms introduced in July 2019 were aimed at expanding women's roles in Saudi society and granting them unprecedented economic freedoms. These included granting women the right to obtain passports on their own, allowing them to be heads of households and choose their place of residency, prohibiting the dismissal of pregnant women from the workplace, ensuring non-discrimination based on gender in access to credit, prohibiting gender-based discrimination in employment, equalizing retirement ages between women and men, and removing the obedience provision for women. A year later, amendments to the Labor Law were introduced, lifting restrictions on women's ability to work at night and opening all industries to women.³

United Arab Emirates: The UAE's Comprehensive Strategy for the Empowerment of Emirati Women 2015–2021 has paved the way for federal government institutions and organizations to develop work programs aimed at empowering women in all areas of sustainable development. The strategy focused on eight main areas: education, health, the economy, lawmaking, the environment, the social domain, information, political participation, and decision-making. To further promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, the Gender Balance Council was established in the UAE to enhance the leadership role of Emirati women in the country's development and ensure that federal institutions implement best practices to achieve their gender equality goals. The UAE has also introduced laws and initiatives to protect women's rights, provide equal job opportunities, ensure decent living standards, and promote their creativity in sustainable and developmental domains.

Additionally, the UAE has taken significant steps to support women's labor force participation, including becoming the first country in the MENA region to introduce paid parental leave for employees in the private sector. The 2020 reform package builds on previous work done by the UAE to prioritize gender equality and women's

² Retrieved from <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1444/03/11/qatar-affirms-that-advancement-of-women-is-priority-of-its-policy>.

³ Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/31327/WBL2019.pdf>.

economic empowerment, including reforms enacted in 2019 to guarantee equality between men and women in applying for passports, allowing women to be heads of households, passing legislation to combat domestic violence and sexual harassment in the workplace, prohibiting gender-based discrimination in employment, and removing job restrictions for women in specific sectors. These reforms were recognized in the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law 2021 report, where the UAE was the highest-ranked country in the MENA region.⁴

8.5 Challenges to Women's Empowerment in the Gulf

While there have been positive developments in gender equality in the Gulf region, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) noted in 2014 that these advancements have yet to result in increased empowerment and participation of women in public life. In a 2019 report by the MENA Gender Innovation Lab of the World Bank, it was revealed that women's empowerment in the region is still hindered by several challenges, including the need to enhance women's agency and effective representation in decision-making, enforcing equal opportunity laws and regulations, and addressing cultural and social norms that create barriers to women's participation in the economy. The report also emphasized the importance of involving men and boys in promoting gender equality.

These gaps are not exclusive to the Gulf region and gender equality is a common challenge for all nations. However, as pointed out by Hadad (2018), the nature and intensity of these challenges may vary due to ethnic and cultural diversity within each country. Therefore, experts in the region emphasize the need for constructive intercultural dialogue, international cooperation, and a culturally sensitive approach to promoting women's empowerment (DIFI, 2012). It is also essential to recognize the indispensable role that women play in policymaking. Research conducted in the past decade has shown that societies tend to be more peaceful and prosperous when women fully participate in civic and economic life. Women's empowerment is not solely a "feminist issue" but can also be a high-yielding tool for advancing peace and stability. Furthermore, there is a correlation between women's political inclusion and the durability of policies (Robinson, 2021).

Despite a wealth of literature on women's empowerment, there is a notable lack of research on the Gulf region, with the experiences of Arab women being underrepresented in academic literature. Existing research, including the findings presented in this book, highlights that challenges to women's empowerment in the Gulf predominantly stem from cultural, socioeconomic, and political factors.

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.moec.gov.ac/en/-/gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women-and-girls>.

8.6 Cultural Dimensions

Women's empowerment in the Gulf region is influenced by various cultural factors that differ significantly between countries due to diverse historical and contextual backgrounds. Interpretations of women's roles within Islamic societies revolve around the complementarity of gender roles and responsibilities, which are crucial to understanding the cultural processes of societal organization (Metcalf, 2011). Therefore, these differences have significant implications for women's empowerment, particularly in terms of gender stereotypes and subsequent roles and responsibilities. The following section provides a brief overview of these dimensions.

- (a) **Lack of fatherhood engagement.** Research spanning several decades has demonstrated that a father's involvement is essential to the development and socio-emotional well-being of their children. Although there is a lack of literature on fatherhood in the Arab world, recent research by Ridge et al. (2017) has highlighted disparities in paternal and maternal roles and responsibilities in the Gulf region. The study found that while fathers ranked high as providers, they were less involved in engaging with their children. This has been attributed to the Gulf's changing labor market and the rapid oil industrialization, which altered family dynamics as fathers began leaving their local businesses and agricultural work to seek employment with the state, resulting in their increased absence from their families' lives (Ridge et al., 2017)
- (b) **Decrease in shared family responsibilities.** The past two decades have seen an improvement in the standard of living and an increase in dual-earner families in the Gulf, resulting in significant social changes in work and family life. Women are now required to balance the demands of employment with the responsibilities of caring for their children and extended family. As a result, parents in the Gulf region have become increasingly reliant on nannies and maids for childcare and domestic work. While this has helped dual-earner mothers and fathers manage their responsibilities, they consistently report difficulty in spending enough time with their children. However, the need for parental involvement, interaction, and emotional availability for children remains high (Lari & Al-Emadi, 2022).
- (c) **Evolving gender roles and stereotypes.** To address socioeconomic barriers while preserving Arab and Islamic identity, countries in the Arab Gulf region have integrated women's empowerment into their national strategies. For instance, Qatar's second National Development Strategy (2018–2022) aimed to “increase the number of women in leadership and decision-making positions, while reducing stereotyping of women's roles and responsibilities” (p. 18). However, the first National Development Strategy (2011–2016) recognized that such progress necessitates “careful consideration and proper respect...to traditional values and cultural sensitivities, even as necessary advancements are made in social equality, protection and justice” (p. 212). Therefore, addressing evolving gender roles and stereotypes within these strategic frameworks requires further empirical studies that take into account the Islamic worldview.

- (d) **Divorce and diminished family cohesion.** Although the divorce rate in the Gulf is lower than in the Western world, experts suggest that “the growing divorce rates in the Gulf countries might be due to changes in social structures resulting from economic development, urbanization, education, employment, and globalization” (DIFI, 2022). These changes have a particularly significant negative impact on women and children, increasing the need for additional support in multiple economic and social contexts.

8.7 Socioeconomic Dimensions

The pursuit of women’s empowerment through research and policy often focuses on increasing the number of women in the workforce and promoting economic growth through structural and organizational changes (Kemp & Rodriguez, 2019). Unfortunately, this discourse has also perpetuated negative stereotypes about women who prioritize caring for their children, nurturing them, and socializing them (DIFI, 2019, p. 39). Therefore, Naguib and Aref (Chap. 4) emphasize the need for a culturally sensitive and integrative multi-level lens to identify the factors that promote or hinder women’s economic empowerment. Additional identified challenges are outlined below:

- (a) **Limited policies to support work-family balance.** The Gulf region currently has limited policies regarding flexible work arrangements and balancing work-family responsibilities. Women still primarily shoulder childcare and household duties at home, adding to the challenges faced by full-time working women. As more women participate in education and the workforce, Gulf countries must ensure that women receive support for their family roles and responsibilities, while also maintaining family integrity. These challenges are further discussed in Chap. 5 by Barbar, Naguib, and Abu Hilal, and in Chap. 7 by Langworthy and Naguib.
- (b) **High female educational attainment and lower labor force participation rates.** Qatari women have some of the highest levels of education among Gulf countries, yet their participation in the workforce remains relatively low. The Qatar Planning and Statistics Authority (2020) reports that almost half (46%) of Qatari women are not engaged in the labor market, with 87% being full-time students or homemakers. This may be due, in part, to women prioritizing their commitment to children and family during their early years, as discussed in Chap. 3 by Naguib and Aref. Further research is needed to explore policies that can accommodate and utilize this highly educated segment of society when they choose to re-enter the workforce after dedicating time to raising their children.
- (c) **Insufficient legal provisions/oversight for wage equality.** The most recent OECD Women in Public Life report highlights the need for stronger legal provisions to ensure wage equality in the Gulf region, as persistent gender pay gaps and a disproportionate number of women in lower-paid jobs continue to hinder economic efficiency and gender equality (2014). Although updated labor laws

in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia aim to reduce the gender pay gap by promoting equal pay for equal work, it is crucial for the private sector to implement these laws into their workplace policies and make necessary changes to ensure compliance (Matthews-Taylor et al., 2020).

8.8 Political Dimensions

The political dimensions of women's empowerment in the Gulf region are rooted in a combination of socio-cultural, structural, and institutional factors, which often result in women's underrepresentation in policymaking positions (Dauletova et al., 2022). This lack of representation can lead to policies and laws that overlook the importance of gender-sensitive perspectives in areas that directly affect women and their families. Therefore, without active engagement in these critical arenas, gender equity may remain elusive in the region.

- (a) **Lack of representation at policymaking levels.** Although progress has been made in reducing gender disparities in education and labor force participation in the Gulf region, women continue to face significant obstacles when it comes to political involvement and representation, as noted by Alhashmi (2019). Despite efforts to increase women's representation in elected legislative bodies and government, progress has been slow. For example, during the 2021 Shura Council elections in Qatar, 28 women ran for council, but none were elected within the tribal-based voting districts. Two women were later appointed to the state's advisory Shura Council, which provided a potential opportunity for women's empowerment through political representation. However, the lack of inclusion in political spaces and cultural/tribal barriers continue to negatively impact women's empowerment both directly and indirectly, given the critical role women play in policymaking. Chapter 5 by Fouad sheds light on the need for representation and inclusiveness and brings into discussion the concept of class.
- (b) **Social exclusion of expatriate women.** The Gulf region heavily relies on expatriate workers, who make up a significant portion of the population in countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. While expatriate women are able to take advantage of the region's labor demands, they often face vulnerability, limited mobility, and workplace discrimination, as noted by Hertog (2014). Aref (2021) further explains that employment policies in the region follow an inclusion/exclusion pattern, where "exclusion is caused by the explicit privileges granted exclusively to nationals" (p. 124). This is due to a combination of factors, such as tribal societies, strict social stratification, structural inequality between nationals and expatriates, and difficult-to-attain social mobility (p. 125). Various nationalization agendas are in place in the Gulf region. For instance, Qatar has introduced a part-time employment policy in the public sector specifically for Qatari women. In the United Arab Emirates, low-status expatriates are frequently unable to negotiate contracts and are often

on short-term work visas with their employers as sponsors. Additionally, Kuwait provides wage, social, and child allowances exclusively for its nationals, and not for expatriates on long-term employment contracts, as noted by Haak-Saheem et al. (2021). These policies further highlight the disparity between national and expatriate workers in the region, which can have negative implications for expatriate women's opportunities and access to resources.

- (c) **Insufficient judicial protection in family relations.** While Gulf countries have made significant progress in closing legal gaps for women and their families, there is still a long way to go in areas such as custody, marriage, inheritance, gender-based violence, and access to the justice system. Despite domestic laws being passed by GCC states, gaps remain in investigating and holding individuals accountable for gender-based violence, and few studies address the issue. For example, although Qatar's second National Development Strategy (2018–2022) emphasized the “urgent need to review and develop family protection legislations and policies” (p. 220), there is still a need for legislation specifically addressing domestic violence (World Bank, 2019). Furthermore, improving women's empowerment in the judicial arena requires addressing complex legal frameworks in the Gulf region.

8.9 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Women play a crucial role in families, politics, the economy, and the overall peace and security of nations. To address the challenges outlined in this policy brief, the following recommendations are proposed⁵:

1. **Ensure that women's empowerment is integrated into national strategies and action plans,** with the establishment or strengthening of institutional structures dedicated to implementing and monitoring gender policies and programs. Additionally, develop methods to enhance coordination and collaboration between government agencies to ensure the mainstreaming of gender issues.
2. **Align gender-related goals with the strategies of regional and national ministries of social development and family.** Ensure that women's empowerment is mainstreamed across all sectors and levels of policies and practices, in addition to targeted actions for women and girls. These components should be seen as essential parts of the same strategy. Strengthen the production and sharing of information on women's empowerment between Gulf states to promote regional cooperation and encourage positive spillover effects into neighboring countries.

⁵ Adapted from Robinson, N. (2021, November 23). Women, peace, and security initiative: Advancing U.S. interests through women's empowerment. The Heritage Foundation; and Doha International Family Institute. (2012). *Empowerment of Women in Arab Countries*. Special series volume 5.

3. **Policy implementation should not be based on a one-size-fits-all approach.** It is essential to involve academia in the production of country-specific, gender-relevant research to provide evidence for policy design and follow-up. This includes analysis of public information on gender-sensitive issues.
4. **Encourage the active participation of civil society organizations and family-centered NGOs in the policymaking process.** Provide support for these organizations to build institutional capacity for promoting women's empowerment. Civil society, including NGOs, the private sector, academia, religious communities/leaders, and community-based organizations, women's groups, and families, should be recognized as valuable resources for facilitating women's empowerment at both local and national levels.
5. **Strengthen data-driven programming to prioritize accountability.** Enhance the collection and utilization of gender and age-sensitive data and research, involving academia to generate relevant data and develop evidence-based policy design and decision-making. The availability of comprehensive data on women's rights, gender-based violence, and socioeconomic indicators can help in the monitoring and evaluation of policy initiatives, thereby increasing accountability and transparency.
6. **Incorporate Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) tools and conduct thorough monitoring and evaluation.** Introduce new practical tools, such as GIA and Gender Budgeting, and adapt existing evaluation strategies and techniques to assess policy outcomes. Ensure that GIA is integrated into the policymaking process to identify and address gender disparities in all policy areas. Conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of policies to ensure that they are meeting their intended goals and to identify any unintended consequences.
7. **Reinforce the regional research agenda on women's empowerment.** The body of knowledge on women's empowerment in the Gulf region has several under-researched topics or those that lack empirical evidence. These research gaps include women's roles in policymaking, women's well-being, especially in reconciling motherhood, caregiving responsibilities, and work commitments, social inclusion/exclusion of expatriate women, and perceptions of women's roles. Proper funding is needed to enhance the research agenda, which can be challenging to attain as gender issues are still considered a "sensitive" area in the region.

The emergence of a new post-pandemic era presents an unprecedented opportunity to renew the commitment to a more sustainable future for women and their families in the Gulf region. This book has shown that long-term progress in women's empowerment requires policies that are tailored to the unique cultural and religious values of the region. Effective policy implementation and monitoring must involve collaboration between government agencies, civil society, and families.

To ensure evidence-based policy development and evaluation, academia and other research institutions should produce gender-specific research. A family-centered approach that empowers women while recognizing the important roles of men and

boys is crucial for promoting individual and collective well-being and achieving sustainable progress in women's empowerment.

In summary, achieving sustainable progress in women's empowerment in the Gulf region requires a holistic approach that includes evidence-based gender policies, collaboration between stakeholders, and gender-specific research. The post-pandemic era presents an unparalleled opportunity to renew the commitment to a more sustainable future for women and their families.

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