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**A Quiet Revolution in the Making? The  
Replacement of Expatriate Labor through  
the Feminization of the Labor Force in GCC  
Countries**

by

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# **A Quiet Revolution in the Making? The Replacement of Expatriate Labor through the Feminization of the Labor Force in GCC Countries**

John Willoughby\*\*

## **Abstract**

This provides an empirical overview of the utilization of expatriate labor and changes in the presence of women in each country's workforce. These assessments also include a discussion of the educational status of Gulf women and changes in their childbearing experience. This analysis reveals that women of all GCC countries have made striking educational gains. On the other hand, the last thirty years have also been a period of national differentiation. While fertility rates have dropped in all countries and the percentage of national women in the labor force has risen, these trends are less pronounced in Saudi Arabia. Whether or not the feminization of the labor force intensifies throughout the region will depend on shifts in Saudi policy.

**Key words:** [Women, Gulf Arab States]

**JEL classification:** [O53, Asia Including Middle East, J16, Economics of Gender]

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**A Quiet Revolution in the Making?**

**The Replacement of Expatriate Labor through the Feminization of the Labor Force  
in GCC Countries**

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## **Introduction**

The labor markets of oil-rich Arabia and the Gulf are unique in two important ways. First, the GCC countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are heavily reliant on the labor services of expatriate workers. Second, the labor forces of these countries are disproportionately male. I argue in this paper that the increasing pressure by women to enter the labor force could lead to the simultaneous “feminization” and “nationalization” of waged work in the Arabian Peninsula. If such a development occurs, this would surely constitute a revolution in the ways in which gender and work are organized in the Gulf.

The essay’s first two sections provide an empirical overview of the utilization of expatriate labor and changes in the presence of women in each country’s workforce. These assessments also include a discussion of the educational status of Gulf women and changes in their childbearing experience. This analysis reveals that women of all GCC countries have made striking educational gains. On the other hand, the last thirty years have also been a period of national differentiation. While fertility rates have dropped in all countries and the percentage of national women in the labor force has risen, these trends are more pronounced in the smaller GCC countries. Whether or not the feminization of the labor force intensifies throughout the region will depend on shifts in Saudi policy. Sections three and four of this essay make this argument by contrasting the situation of women workers of Bahrain to those of Saudi Arabia.

## Section I: Expatriate Labor in the Arabian Peninsula

The large presence of “foreigners” in the Gulf is not a new phenomenon, for contrary to common myth, peoples from other parts of the Gulf and Arabian Sea regions often settled in the small mercantile towns along the coastal areas of Persia and the Arabian Peninsula. The mercantile and fishing people of the Gulf countries (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman) had ancient, well-established relations with Mesopotamia, Persia, South Asian and Africa, and it was not unusual for significant numbers of peoples from these regions to establish residences and work in these towns.<sup>1</sup> On the other side of Arabia in the Hijaz, the holy cities of Mecca and Medina also contained what could be described as an Islamic multicultural ambience.<sup>2</sup> As with the Gulf, these interactions with the rest of the world largely bypassed Europe. Perhaps, these close connections with Asia and Africa heightened distorted European perceptions that all of Arabia was an isolated, exotic territory outside of its control.

I stress this historical legacy to contest the sense inside and outside of Arabia that a considerable expatriate presence in the Gulf and Arabia is somehow unique. On the other hand, it is important to note that the massive immigration of foreign labor does make the contemporary period distinct from all previous economic epochs. Tables I and II provide data that make this point especially clearly. In the first place, the last half-century has been a time of enormous population growth. In the second place, the percentage of expatriates in the total population ranges from a high 28% in the relatively

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<sup>1</sup> The type of “foreigners” in the mercantile Gulf towns has differed spatially and temporally. Oman, for example, has a large African presence because of its close relations with Zanzibar and East Africa. During the quasi colonial period of much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Indian presence continued to be strong in Bahrain, Kuwait Oman, Dubai, and Sharjah as Britain supervised Gulf developments through the largely Indian bureaucracy of the colonial government of India.

<sup>2</sup> See Suraiya Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and Sultans: The Hajj under the Ottomans* (Munich: Artemis Verlag, 1994) and F.E. Peters, *The Hajj* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

poor Oman to an extremely high 76% in the much richer United Arab Emirates. The absolute and relative number of “expats” has certainly increased even if the presence of foreigners is not without precedent.

**Table I**  
**Population Growth of the Arabian Peninsula, 1950-97**  
**(thousands)**

	<b>1950</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1970</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1997</b>
<b>Bahrain</b>	116	156	220	347	503	620
<b>Kuwait</b>	152	278	744	1,357	2,143	2,153
<b>Oman</b>	413	505	654	988	1,524	2,256
<b>Qatar</b>	25	45	111	229	490	522
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	3,201	4,075	5,745	9,372	15,800	19,500
<b>UAE</b>	70	90	223	1,015	1,589	2,696
<b>GCC Total</b>	3,977	5,149	7,697	13,326	22,049	27,747

*Source:* Kapiszewski, Andrzej. “Population, Labor and Education Dilemmas Facing GCC States at the Turn of the Century.” Paper presented at the conference Crossroads of the New Millenium, Abu Dhabi, UAE, April 9, 2000.

**Table 2**  
Population of Nationals and Expatriates, 1997  
 (thousands)

	<b>Nationals</b>	<b>Expatriates</b>	<b>% Expatriate</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Bahrain</b>	384	236	39.0	620
<b>Kuwait</b>	744	1409	66	2,153
<b>Oman</b>	1,642	614	28	2,256
<b>Qatar</b>	157	365	67	522
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	13,500	6,000	31	19,500
<b>UAE</b>	658	2,038	76	2,696
<b>GCC</b>	17,085	10,662	39	27,747

Source: Ibid.

As the last comment suggests and Tables 3 and 4 indicate, while the internal population growth has been high in all countries, per capita GDP seems to regulate the degree to which expatriate labor is used. Those nations with lower per-capita GDP rely more on their national workforce, while the more wealthy nations of Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates manifest both greater expatriate presence in their society as well as higher internal population growth.<sup>3</sup> Despite Saudi Arabia's smaller relative reliance on foreign labor, approximately 66 percent of expatriate workers within the GCC are employed there.

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<sup>3</sup> The higher internal population growth in the richer countries might not be due to a higher birth rate. Rather, the sharper increase in the national population might be due to the decisions of more family groups to locate in richer territories. Until the boundaries were settled, it was sometimes possible to choose what country to belong to.

**Table 3**

**Per Capita GDP and the Presence of Expatriates in the National Population**

<b>GCC Countries Ranked by Per Capita GDP</b>	<b>Per Capita GDP (PPP 1999)</b>	<b>Percentage of Expatriates in Total Population</b>	<b>Percentage Growth of National Population (1950-1997)</b>
Qatar	\$18,789	67	528
UAE	\$18,162	76	840
Kuwait	\$17,289	66	389
Bahrain	\$13,688	39	231
Oman	\$13,356	28	298
Saudi Arabia	\$10,815	31	322
GCC		39	330

*Sources:* Kapiszewski, 2000, and United Nations Development Program. *Human Development Report 2001*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

**Table 4**

**Nationals and Expatriates in the Workforce, 1995-97**  
(thousands)

	<b>Nationals in Workforce</b>	<b>Expatriates in Workforce</b>	<b>Total in Workforce</b>	<b>Expatriate Workforce as % of Total Workforce</b>	<b>Expatriate Population as % of Total Population</b>
<b>Qatar</b>	22	98	120	82	67
<b>UAE</b>	124	1,165	1,290	90	76
<b>Kuwait</b>	189	991	1,180	84	66
<b>Bahrain</b>	104	169	272	62	39
<b>Oman</b>	270	496	766	62	28
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	2,500	4,500	7,000	64	31
<b>Total GCC</b>	3,209	7,419	10,627	70	39

*Source:* Kapiszewski, 2000.

Based on these broad data, I hypothesize that three factors have stimulated the demand for foreign or expatriate labor. First, the creation of an infrastructure for exploiting petroleum riches required both highly trained professionals and manual



laborers. Neither the skill levels nor size of the indigenous population were adequate for establishing the basis of this export-led growth. Second, as per-capita GDP rose, the demand for durable consumer goods, leisure services, childcare and cleaning services, educational and health services, and information technology generated a powerful employment multiplier effect that pulled foreign workers into a broad array of occupations.<sup>4</sup> Third, as per capita GDP grew, nationals began to rely on government support and the recruitment of expats to facilitate the substitution of leisure for labor. There is no doubt that expatriate workers are crucial to the ways in which Gulf economies and societies function.

Any dispassionate economic analysis would tell us that this massive influx of peoples has produced mutually beneficial outcomes for those employers and employees directly involved in the buying and selling of labor power. On the Gulf side, employers have had access to low-cost labor that has permitted the more rapid expansion of infrastructure, investment and consumption goods production. Moreover, the institutions of labor and business recruitment have allowed Gulf residents to raise their living standards through the “sponsorship” of foreign labor or of expatriate owned businesses. On the expatriate labor side, the higher wages offered Gulf workers have raised living standards for the workers and for those receiving their remittances. This holds even for most of those who labor in low wage occupations under harsh conditions that often violate standard labor practices. This conclusion may be unpalatable to labor rights

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<sup>4</sup> El Musa has argued that the oil economy provided no backward or forward linkages to Gulf economies. The absence of backward linkages—that is, the development of industries to supply the technologically sophisticated oil industry—is a plausible claim. On the other hand, the huge rise in living standards has spawned enormous forward linkages indicated by the development of service industries that require significant technological capability [Sherif S. El Musa, “Technology and the Dynamics of Socio-Economic Change,” *The Middle East Journal* 51 (Summer 1997): 358-72].

advocates, but is really an indication of the very onerous working and living conditions that presently face the Asian workers who look for employment in the Gulf.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the clear contributions that foreign labor has made to the development of the Gulf, this does not mean that we can expect the same relative number of expatriates to live in the Gulf indefinitely. As the internal populations of the region grow, increasing economic pressure could force a change in policy that leads to the “nationalization” of the workforces of this region. Indeed, the leadership of every country has publicly pledged itself to such campaigns.

The economic reasons for the attempt to replace foreign workers with national workers are rooted in a slowly building fiscal crisis that is linked to the long run stagnation of real oil earnings, an inability or unwillingness to tax the national population, and a generous income transfer program that will grow increasingly expensive as the national population grows. Given the limited ability of the state sector to absorb the large number of young people entering working age, the hope is to replace foreign workers in the private sector for nationals in order to reduce the state’s need to support its population with direct subsidies.

In addition to this looming economic difficulty, there are political reasons why the Gulf States (including Saudi Arabia) would wish to reduce its dependence on expatriate labor. First, the migration of workers to the Gulf has also led to a migration of businesspeople and professionals. The need for technical and managerial labor has led to the placement of a relatively permanent enclave of middle class workers and their families. It is not unusual for children born into these households to view the Gulf as

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the benefits that working in Gulf has yielded for poor workers from the state of Kerala, India, see John Willoughby, “Ambivalent Anxieties of the South Asian-Gulf Arab Labor Exchange”, Working Paper, American University, Fall 2002.

their home. While there is little evidence so far that these populations will soon demand citizenship rights and the corresponding supports from the state, there is a fear amongst the national populations that their political and cultural integrity is under siege.

It is clear to most observers that the substitution of South Asian workers and professionals for expatriate Arabs is not just due to the lower wages that come with populations from the east. Politico-cultural, linguistic, and religious commonalities allow the non-national Arab populations to have a greater claim on citizenship rights than South Asians. Because these people have less loyalty to the ruling families of the region, the possibility for political destabilization is thereby greater. Saudi authorities concluded, for example, that the presence of a sizeable Yemeni business, professional and working class population was incompatible with the stability of the state during the first Gulf War. As a result upwards of one million “Yemenis” were expelled in one of the largest and least commented on population expulsions of the modern era.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the large presence of Indians, Pakistanis, and Sri Lankans—whether Muslim or not—has led to a less integrated society that can impose additional inconveniences on the national population. For example, the fact that many shopkeepers and clerks find it easier to communicate in English rather than Arabic can make even daily tasks such as shopping difficult and frustrating for national citizens.

The key to moving national citizens more forcefully into the workforce will eventually require the replacement of foreign workers in the private sector. In the richer Gulf states, many of those national citizens who do work are largely employed in high

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<sup>6</sup> AllRefer, *SaudiArabian Information Resource* (<http://reference.allrefer.com/country-guide-study/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia99.html>). Downloaded November 18, 2004.

wage sectors. In the United Arab Emirates, for example, Emiratis can primarily be found in the state sector, the oil sector or the banking sector.

**Table 5**

**Average Annual Compensation by Economic Sector in UAE, 1997**  
(thousands of Dollars)

<b>Economic Sector</b>	<b>Percent of Workforce</b>	<b>Annual Compensation</b>	<b>Percent of Government Services Compensation</b>
<b>Crude Oil</b>	1.6	24.2	82
<b>Agriculture</b>	7.6	3.8	13
<b>Mining and Quarrying</b>	0.3	7.2	24
<b>Manufacturing</b>	11.8	6.7	23
<b>Electricity, Gas, and Water</b>	1.8	13.2	45
<b>Construction</b>	19.1	10.4	35
<b>Wholesale and Retail Trade</b>	17.3	7.3	25
<b>Restaurants and Hotels</b>	3.8	6.0	20
<b>Transportation, Storage, and Communication</b>	7.3	10.2	35
<b>Finance and Insurance</b>	1.5	26.5	90
<b>Real Estate</b>	2.5	7.6	26
<b>Government Services</b>	10.9	29.5	100
<b>Social and Personal Services</b>	4.6	7.9	27
<b>Domestic Services*</b>	10.0	2.8	10
<b>Weighted Average</b>		10.4	35

*Source:* International Monetary Fund, International Monetary Fund. *United Arab Emirates: Recent Economic Developments*. IMF Staff Country Report No. 98/134. Washington, DC: 1998.

\*Does not include room and board expenses borne by employer.

The unusual gaps in wages point to the existence of an extremely bifurcated labor market. The state sector's wages represent an implicit subsidy to the national population, especially when one considers that the public sector is overstaffed and plagued with problems of employee absenteeism. Many national governments have placed considerable pressure on private oil companies and banks to train and hire national employees. While this represents some progress towards the nationalization of the labor force, such measures are clearly insufficient, since the oil and finance industries absorb only three percent of the workforce.

To draw nationals into the rest of the workforce, the state must provide subsidies to the employer and employee. Businesses often object to the hiring of nationals claiming that these workers are too expensive and are not as reliable as the more vulnerable and hardworking expatriate workforce. On the other hand, nationals are reluctant to enter into the private sector workforce when it might be possible to obtain a public sector job by waiting for a position to open up. Not only are wages higher but private sector jobs lack pension benefits, are less prestigious and are often more demanding.

National workers in poorer countries might be more willing to enter into the private sector workforce, but the evidence is mixed. For example, the Saudi government recently proclaimed that all taxis must be driven by Saudi nationals. The policy has resulted in the replacement of some South Asian taxi drivers by Saudis. Nevertheless, my informants tell me that South Asian and some Egyptian workers are still driving most taxis. Either not enough Saudi men have stepped forward to replace foreign workers, or the owners of taxi companies prefer to continue hiring cheaper and/or more reliable

expatriate workers—the employment of which can also generate substantial revenue through the sponsorship system.

Thus far, the national government attempts to “nationalize” the workforce by proclaiming quotas or hiring bans have not really reversed any country’s dependence on foreign labor. The political economic reasons for this failure are many.

- Governments have been reluctant to reduce wages in the public sector so that national populations would be less willing to wait for public sector jobs.
- Government training programs are inadequate.
- Governments are reluctant to reduce subsidies granted to nationals by virtue of their citizenship status.
- Businesses have resisted hiring national workers even when wages are subsidized because of a general sense that national workers lack the work effort and skills of the immigrant workforce.
- Citizens benefit from the system of private sponsorships that allow nationals to skim off economic rents by virtue of the rules that force expatriate owned businesses and workers to pay fees in order to stay in the country.
- Individual workers are reluctant to take on jobs that have lower prestige and benefits than those enjoyed by their older family members.

All of these problems point to a more general issue. Oil revenues have created a rentier political economic culture that is very hard to reverse. In addition, it is clear that the drive nationalize the workforce might succeed in replacing one set of subsidies for another. The potential fiscal crisis might not diminish, and the government might then confront large numbers of discontented citizen workers, rather than discontented, but

isolated citizens waiting for government supports or patronage from members of the various ruling families of the region.<sup>7</sup> There is a political risk to the nationalization of the workforce that is not often acknowledged.

## **Section 2: The Increasing Presence of National Women in the GCC Labor Forces**

The preceding discussion has ignored one crucial dimension of policies to nationalize employment: the integration of women into the workforce. Many of the jobs now filled by expatriate men in professional, clerical and retail occupations could conceivably attract national women. Over the last thirty years, the rise in female presence in the labor force has been substantial. The data available for most countries do not always allow us to identify these women workers as national citizens, but substantial improvements in educational attainment combined with reports of national women working in much larger numbers in sex-segregated educational and health fields do suggest that the Arabian labor force is becoming feminized. This does not mean that male control over women is somehow in ineluctable decline. Nevertheless, commentators who correctly note the substantial barriers to women's employment in Arabia have often overlooked the very real changes that are taking place in the gender composition of the world of work.

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<sup>7</sup> This last point probably deserves more scholarly attention. Many of the subsidies that citizens receive do not come through the state, but from members of the royal families who respond to pleas for assistance. The informal patronage networks that develop bind citizens to royalist rule. Any attempt to rationalize social subsidies to push reluctant citizens into the workforce is likely to be resisted by both the poorer nationals and the royal families who use patronage to secure their position in society.

**Table 6**

**The Percentage of Women in the Labor Force Compared to the  
Percentage of Females in the Population**  
**(F%LF) / (F%P)**

	1980	2000
Bahrain	.26	.47
Kuwait	.30	.66
Oman	.13	.36
Qatar	.19	.42
Saudi Arabia	.17	.35
UAE	.16	.44
Middle East and North Africa	.49	.57
India	.71	.67
China	.88	.94
Indonesia	--	.82

Source: Computed from World Bank, *Genderstats: Data Base of Gender Statistics* (devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats) Downloaded October 6, 2004.

Direct data on the extent to which women participate in the labor market is hard to come by. Given discriminatory barriers and statistical agencies that often do not investigate the labor market behavior of its citizens, it is difficult to get accurate information on the desire of national women to find work outside the household. On the other hand, the above table does compare the proportion of women in the population to the proportion of women who are actually in the workforce. This table does not provide information that allows us to distinguish expatriate women from national women, but I would hypothesize that any changes we observe over time is most likely due to the increased number of national women entering employment. Comparing the proportion of women in the workforce to the proportion of women in the national population gives us a



rough estimate of differences in female labor force participation over time and across countries and region.

An examination of the table suggests two major findings. First, the relative presence of women in the labor force has more than doubled over the past twenty years in every Gulf country but Bahrain, which remains the country with the second highest relative presence of women in the workforce. Second, despite this significant expansion in the position of women in the labor force, the Gulf countries still have disproportionately male workforces. With the exception of Kuwait, the relative number of women workers with respect to the population is lower than the average for all Middle Eastern and North African countries. When compared to India, Indonesia, and China, the gap is even more significant.

Of these two findings, the trend showing a substantial rise in women's presence in the labor force is more significant. Arabia has always been known as that territory of the world least accommodating to desires of women to waged work in "modern" occupations.<sup>8</sup> The displayed in Table 7, for example indicate that in most countries less than a tenth of the waged workforce was women in 1975. In less than thirty years, these percentages have more than tripled in all GCC countries.

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<sup>8</sup> Commentators have long noticed that poor Saudi women often worked as petty traders, herders of animals and agriculturalists. We are referring here to the absence of women as waged workers in white collar or blue collar sectors. For a historical perspective, see Aisha Almana, "Economic Development and its Impact on the Status of Women in Saudi Arabia", *Social Science Research and Women in the Arab World* (Paris: UNESCO and London: Frances Pinter, 1984).

**Table 7**

**Women as a Percentage of the Labor Force, 1975-2000**

	<b>1975</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>2000</b>
<b>Bahrain</b>	5	11	21
<b>Kuwait</b>	8	13	31
<b>Oman</b>		6	17
<b>Qatar</b>	2	7	15
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	5	8	16
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	3	5	15

Sources: 1975 data from *Statistical Abstract of the Region of the Economic Commission for Western Asia, Second Issue: Part I*, (Beirut: 1977). ILO, Labor Force Estimates and Projections, 1950-2000, bu.I and II, (Geneva: 1977). Cited in Almana. (See footnote 8.) 1980 and 2000 data from World Bank, *Genderstats: Data Base of Gender Statistics* (devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats) Downloaded October 6, 2004.

The rise in the presence of women workers in the economy is closely related to dramatic changes in female educational attainment. Over the past twenty years, there have been sharp falls in adult and youth female illiteracy. The results are not only impressive over time, but also suggest a more effective commitment to improving female education in the Gulf than in much of the rest of the Middle East. Indeed, in the smaller Gulf countries, young women are now more likely to be literate than men—a result that is certainly not replicated in the Middle East/North African region as whole, where in fact there has been no improvement relative to men in the literacy status of girls and women. In Saudi Arabia and Oman, adult male and youth male illiteracy is lower than both categories of female illiteracy, but the difference between the sexes is rapidly diminishing in Saudi Arabia. The relative gap between men and women is still large in Oman.

On the other hand, school enrollment data in all countries (including Oman) suggest that girls are as likely to attend primary and secondary school as boys. Moreover, attendance in institutions of higher education is higher for young women than young men in all countries. We can reasonably expect a further narrowing of the educational gap between men and women in the GCC. In this sense, the Gulf seems to be a zone of progressive female empowerment.

**Table 8**  
**Female and Male Illiteracy Rates in Arabia and the Gulf**

	Female Illiteracy Rate	Male Illiteracy Rate	Youth Female Illiteracy Rate	Youth Male Illiteracy Rate
Bahrain 1980	41	22	14	7
Bahrain 2000	17	9	3	3
Kuwait 1980	41	27	23	17
Kuwait 2000	20	16	7	8
Oman 1980	84	49	64	18
Oman 2000	62	33	25	5
Qatar 1980	35	28	15	18
Qatar 2000	17	20	3	7
S. Arabia 1980	68	35	40	16
S. Arabia 2000	33	17	10	5
UAE 1980	41	33	22	26
UAE 2000	21	25	6	13
Middle East 1980	73	45	55	28
Middle East 2000	48	26	26	14
India 1980	74	45	58	33
India 2000	55	32	35	20
China 1980	46	21	14	4
China 2000	22	8	3	1
Indonesia 1980	40.6	20.9	14.9	7.0
Indonesia 2000	18.1	8.2	2.9	1.7

Source: World Bank, *Genderstats*.

**Table 9****Primary and Secondary Enrollment in Arabia and the Gulf**

	Net Female Primary Enrollment Rate	Net Male Primary Enrollment Rate	Net Female Secondary Enrollment Rate	Net Male Secondary Enrollment Rate
Bahrain 1980	76	84	52	57
Bahrain 2000	92	91	86	76
Kuwait 1980	80	83	--	--
Kuwait 2000	89	83	81	78
Oman 1980	31	76	5	15
Oman 2000	54	75	67	66
S. Arabia 1980	37	56	15	26
S. Arabia 2000	60	61	50	53
UAE 1980	75	72	63*	56*
UAE 2000	78	80	74	70
Middle East 2000	83	86	51	58

\* 1990

Source: Ibid.**Table 10****Higher Education Enrollment in Arabia and the Gulf**

	Gross Tertiary Enrollment Ratio 1980	Gross Tertiary Enrollment Ratio 2000
Bahraini Men	5	15
Bahreini Women	5	28
Kuwaiti Men	9	12
Kuwaiti Women	15	32
Omani Men	0	6
Omani Women	--	10
Qatari Men	6	12
Qatari Women	17	36
Saudi Men	9	20
Saudi Women	5	25
Emirati Men	2	5*
Emirati Women	5	19*

\*1995

Source: Ibid.

Most demographic investigations have found that childbearing activity of women is negatively correlated with increasing labor force activity, improved educational attainment, and rising per capita gross domestic product. The Arabian data confirm some of this consensus. In 1980, fertility rates, which measure births per woman, were quite high. For example, the average Omani woman gave birth to an extraordinary 9.9 children over her fertile years, and in Saudi Arabia, the corresponding figure was 7.3. The lowest figure, 5.2 in Bahrain, was still high by global standards. In 2000, the fertility rate in most countries had decreased significantly. For example, the fertility rate in Oman is now 4.3. This figure is still high, but the small sheikhdoms of the region have seen their fertility rates fall to around 3 per children. The one exception to this pattern is the largest country, Saudi Arabia. Fertility rates have not fallen as sharply, and the fertility rate, 5.5, is now the highest among the GCC countries.

A national and regional comparison shows that fertility rates are higher than the Middle East/North African average. Moreover, while Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar have seen their fertility rates fall below India's, Saudi Arabia and Oman remain well above the high birth rates of this very poor South Asian country. The comparison with Indonesia is especially striking. In that largest of Muslim countries, fertility rates have fallen below the replacement rate of 2.0 births per woman. This replicates the Chinese pattern and is most likely to the fact that the labor force participation rate of Indonesian rate of women must be close to that of adult men because about 45 percent of the Indonesian labor force is female.

The table comparing the fertility rates of the Arabian countries with countries with similar per capita GDP is also suggestive. With the exception of upper middle income Bahrain, fertility rates of Arabian women remain significantly higher than the rates of their similarly wealthy sisters. Despite the fall of the Saudi fertility rate, the relative gap between the Saudi experience and the rest of the upper middle income world has grown wider. On the other hand, the very high fertility rates of 1980 in the other Gulf nation-states have declined at a faster than average rate.

The most likely explanation for the high fertility rates of Arabian women is their relatively low labor force participation. The barriers to female employment are well documented. Ideologies of sex segregation have made it difficult for women to work with unrelated men. As a result, clerical, retail sales, hotel services, and domestic services are not available for most low income national women. On the professional level, it is also difficult for recently educated young women to find employment in administrative/managerial jobs that normally require intense interaction with men. Given the lack of alternatives, pursuing education is a way for young women to escape the confines of the household and increase their ability to marry. Some suggestive sociological studies have indicated that national men now desire educated women as partners. The increasing importance of educational attainment means that male heads of households must now pay more attention to the education of their children. Even in the absence of employment opportunities, there are still powerful reasons why women of the region would demonstrate a strong commitment to education.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mona Al Munajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997).

**Table 11**

**Fertility Rates in Arabia and the Gulf**

	Births per Woman 1980	Births per Woman 2000
Bahrain	5.2	2.8
Kuwait	5.3	2.7
Oman	9.9	4.3
Qatar	5.6	2.6
S. Arabia	7.3	5.5
UAE	5.4	3.2
Middle East and North Africa	6.2	3.3
India	5.0	3.1
China	2.5	1.9
Indonesia	4.3	2.5

Source: Ibid.

**Table 12**

**A Comparison of Fertility Rates with Relevant Income Group  
(National Fertility Rate / Income Group Fertility Rate)**

	1980	2000
<b>Bahrain</b>	1.4	1.1
<b>Kuwait</b>	2.8	1.6
<b>Oman</b>	2.8	1.7
<b>Qatar</b>	2.9	1.5
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	2.0	2.2
<b>UAE</b>	2.8	1.9

Source: Ibid.

This conclusion does not mean that women in the Gulf would not enter the labor market if opportunities were available. The stubbornly high fertility rates in Saudi Arabia and the rise of the relative presence of women in the labor force certainly suggest that there is a pool of female labor available for exploitation. It is important to recognize that women in the region are not homogeneous. Educated young women from elite families

might desire employment to carve out a more autonomous future that links individual empowerment to workplace accomplishment. Women in poorer households might have these goals as well, but their reality might lead to a desire to work primarily in order to raise household incomes.

### **Section III: The Case of Bahrain**

The census data of Bahrain allow us to explore the feasibility of moving national women into the labor force of this small island country.

**Table 13**

**National and Non-National Labor Force Participation of Bahrain  
(2001)**

Labor Force Participation – Total Population	65.7%
Male Labor Force Participation – Total Population	86.0%
Female Labor Force Participation – Total Population	35.5%
Labor Force Participation – Total Expatriate Population	85.6%
Labor Force Participation – Male Expatriate Population	96.8%
Labor Force Participation – Female Expatriate Population	57.0%
Labor Force Participation – Total National Population	49.4%
Labor Participation – Male National Population	72.2%
Labor Force Participation – Female National Population	25.5%

Source: Government of Bahrain, *National Census 2001* ([www.bahrain.gov.bh/census/Part2/01/htm](http://www.bahrain.gov.bh/census/Part2/01/htm).) Downloaded November 10, 2004.

The data in Table 12 show clearly that the labor force participation of the national population is considerably below that of the expatriate population. When the data are



disaggregated by sex, the relatively low participation rate of 25.5% for national women is noteworthy, even though it is likely that Bahraini national women have one of the highest labor force participation rates for any national group of women in the Gulf. When the national data are further divided by age groups, it is clear that many Bahraini women enter the labor force in their mid-twenties only to leave it again in their early thirties. A picture emerges of girls going to secondary school and perhaps college, entering the labor force and then returning to the household as a house wife. On the other hand, a larger proportion of men enter the labor force at an earlier age, and unlike much of the rest of the Gulf, labor force participation is almost universal for those national males between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four.

**Table 14**

**Labor Force Participation of Nationals by Age and Sex**

Age Range	Male Labor Force Participation	Female Labor Force Participation
15-19	20.6%	6.0%
20-24	78.2%	36.1%
25-29	96.1%	50.0%
30-34	97.5%	35.0%
35-39	97.5%	33.5%
40-44	95.6%	29.4%
45-49	93.0%	24.3%
Over 50	55.3%	5.3%
Total	73.2%	25.5%

Source: Ibid.

**Table 15**

**Percent of National Females Who Are Homemakers or Students– By Age Group**

	Percent Homemakers	Percent Students
15-19	3.6	88.1
20-24	26.0	32.0
25-29	46.5	3.2
30-34	57.2	.6
35-39	63.4	
40-44	68.4	
45-49	73.5	
50 and Over	86.3	
Total	50.3	17.2

Source: Ibid,

This sexual division of labor, in which men leave home to perform wage work, while women maintain the household, is certainly a familiar one. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that this “1950’s” pattern is immutable. Education data suggest that as a woman becomes more educated, the likelihood of her performing waged work increases. Indeed, for those women who are the most highly educated, their labor force participation is almost as high as that of their male counterparts.

**Table 16**

**National Labor Force Participation by Educational Status**

	National Males	National Females
Illiterate	39.8%	2.8%
Read and Write	69.9%	7.9%
Primary Certificate	68.1%	10.4%
Preparatory Certificate	87.7%	10.8%
Secondary Certificate	83.7%	31.4%
B.A. or B.Sc.	95.0%	84.3%
M.A.	96.5%	87.1%
Doctorate	97.1%	94.2%

Source: Ibid.

A further examination of the types of jobs that expatriate and national workers take confirms this finding. National women have a relatively large presence in technical, professional, and clerical jobs, all of which presumably require either a secondary certificate or the completion of a college degree. In the professional occupations, national women are almost as numerous as national men; while, in the clerical occupations, more than twice as many national men work in these fields. (The large numbers of national and expatriate men in clerical occupations reflect the fact that the feminization of these occupations is taking place at a much slower pace in the Gulf than in most other parts of the global economy.) It is only in the managerial and business occupations that the presence of educated national women is relatively low, but this result is not especially unique to the Gulf. The elite economic and political occupations in all countries are primarily male.

**Table 17**

**Distribution of Jobs by Nationality and Sex**

	Expatriate Men	Expatriate Women	National Men	National Women
Managerial and Business Owners	6,030 (28.8%)	457 (2.2%)	12,342 (58.9%)	2,135 (10.2%)
Technical Professional	15,605 (33.1%)	4,047 (8.6%)	15,746 (33.4%)	11,777 (25.0%)
Clerical	6,831 (21.6%)	1,180 (3.7%)	16,064 (50.9%)	7,489 (23.7%)
Sales	5,208 (52.0%)	456 (4.6%)	3,126 (31.2%)	1,225 (12.2%)
Services	32,731 (43.0%)	24,345 (32.0%)	17,452 (22.9%)	1,569 (2.1%)
Agriculture, Industry and Construction	76,420 (71.8%)	3,061 (2.9%)	23,719 (22.3%)	3,185 (3.0%)
Total	147,123 (47.8%)	34,097 (11.1%)	94,354 (30.6%)	32,769 (10.6%)

Source: Ibid.

Table 16 also makes it clear that the largest numbers of expatriate workers are laboring in the least prestigious occupational categories of sales, services, industry, and construction. (Agricultural employment is very low in Bahrain.) Because Bahrain is by Gulf standards a relatively poor country, male Bahrainis also have a significant presence in these occupations, but it is only in sales that national women comprise more than 10% of that occupational sector of the workforce.

The educational trends we have cited suggest that Bahraini women will increasingly be able to compete in the clerical and professional job sectors. The following table uses the 2001 census data to construct a simple thought experiment.

**Table 18**

**Increasing Bahraini Female Labor Force Participation: A Thought Experiment**

Labor Force Participation Rate	Number of Female Bahrainis in Workforce	Number of “Additional Workers”	Number of Expatriate Workers in Professional/Clerical Sectors	Number of Expatriate Women in Sales and Services	Expatriate Workers “Leftover”
25.5%	32,796	0	27,663	24,801	52,464
30%	38,547	5,778	27,663	24,801	46,686
40%	51,396	18,627	27,663	24,801	33,837
50%	64,245	31,476	27,663	24,801	20,988
60%	77,094	44,325	27,663	24,801	8,139

Imagine that the labor force participation of women rises from the current rate of 25.5% to 30% and then by 10% increments until 60%. Female labor force participation would have to rise beyond the 40% level before there would not be enough professional/expatriate jobs available for all national female workers. Even if the participation rate rose to 60%, these data suggest that it would still be possible for women to fill either white collar jobs or lower paying service and sales occupations that had been filled by non-Bahraini women. It is of course also quite likely that such a movement of national women into the clerical and sales workforce would reduce the number of expatriate South Asian men working in this area.

The rise in female labor force participation would not eliminate the employment of expatriate labor, since the blue collar jobs in industry and construction would most likely remain primarily filled by non-Bahraini males primarily from South Asia. (One

should note, however, there is a movement in Bahrain to raise the minimum wage, which would have the effect of making the employment of cheap South Asian labor less attractive and thereby reduce the unemployment rate of poor Bahraini males.) On the other hand, such a movement of women into the labor force would allow Bahrainis to capture the income previously earned by foreign workers. This would presumably raise the living standards of the typical Bahraini household and reduce the fiscal pressure on the state.

Bahrain is an unusual Gulf country, in that its oil reserves are largely exhausted and there is a well developed national working class population with a high attachment to the workforce that is supported by indigenous trade unions.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the educational trends combined with relatively low female labor force participation are typical of the region. The scenario we developed suggests that it is plausible to imagine a scenario in which national women replaced expatriate men and in white collar jobs. Technical feasibility, however, does not translate automatically to policy implementation, and there are clearly profound barriers to the integration of national men and women into the workforce.

### **The Case of Saudi Arabia**

The Saudi case is the most extreme, but thereby particularly instructive. During the 1970's, there was a movement of gender liberalism that included the rise of elite women's organizations, television news broadcasts by unveiled women, the loosening of restrictions on face veiling, and a rapid rise in female education. The crises of 1979 that included the Iranian revolution, violent demonstrations against Al Saud rule in eastern

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<sup>10</sup> Need reference on Bahrain labor.

Arabia, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and, most importantly, the seizure of the Grand Mosque by indigenous Islamic radicals led to the reversal of all of these trends except female education. As Doumati puts it:

At the same time, a new round of restrictions to lower the public visibility of women was inaugurated. The morals police rigorously routed out women working as secretaries in offices, and for a week my husband and I shared our two-room hotel suite with a Lebanese couple in hiding because the morals police in Dammam had caught the wife working in her husband's office and had confiscated both their passports. The morals police also looked for unmarried couples eating in restaurants or riding in cars and for improperly dressed women.<sup>11</sup>

The attack was not just on “cosmopolitan” women. At the same time, Saudis also took action to separate the Saudi population from foreigners and the Muslim population from non-Muslims. One striking measure taken was the forced removal of all Muslims—whether Saudi or not—from the foreign French, American and British schools that existed to service the Western expatriate population. The further result was an increased emphasis on face veiling, the importance of women as a “repository” of traditional values, the disappearance of women newsreaders, and the end of the debate about women's place in society. Perhaps most significantly, the civil society women's organizations that were beginning to form in the late 1970's were shut down.<sup>12</sup>

The implications of these measures on women's employment were profound. Attempts by the multinational oil consortium ARAMCO to employ Saudi women as clerical workers came to a sudden halt. Doumati tells the following story about the end of female training programs for high school aged girls who anticipated become clerical workers.

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<sup>11</sup> Eleanor Abdella Doumati, *Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000): 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 13-4.

The mutawwa'in had turned up in four-wheel drives and begun asking the drivers parked in cars outside the training program building who they were and who they were waiting for. It turned out the drivers were neighbors or relatives of the girls in the training program, but not their fathers or brothers. The morality police then marched right into the building ... ordered the students to give their names and fathers' phone numbers, and then called the fathers to come and take their daughters home. From the viewpoint of the mutawwa'in....the school was trying to funnel young women into what would be an immoral situation; they would be working in offices, and men might be there; they might even have a man as a boss. ARAMCO decided that to challenge the morality committee for the sake of "Saudi'izing" the workforce wasn't worth the potential problems. The training program ended ...<sup>13</sup>

The above story allows us to focus on the primary barrier to the integration of women into the workforce—public and private restrictions that sharply restrict the mobility of women. As long as husbands, fathers or brothers must accompany women in public spaces, it will be logistically impossible to create structures that would allow women to work. Even sex segregated employment is threatened by such measures, although it is reasonable to assume that the mutawwa'in are less likely to enforce restrictions on women employed in these safer and less "morally problematic" areas.

There has been considerable discussion of the roots of Saudi's unique system of female oppression. Popular commentators are fond of referring to the "medieval" social practices of a society that only recently has entered the modern era. Others refer to the restrictive and puritanical culture of an Islam heartland untainted by secular influences. I would argue instead for a historically informed framework that recognizes that any social order has alternative social arrangements embedded within it. This focus on the contradictory processes existing in any society allows us to anticipate how a society might evolve in the future as well as more effectively explain the past.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid: 15.



It would of course be silly to dismiss the role that Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia has played in the construction of the present system of Saudi gender relations. Doumati, for instance, argues that the crackdown on women's household-based healing and religious practices that came with the rise of the first Saudi state in the nineteenth century is a key reason why women in Saudi Arabia have not been able to resist such severe restrictions on their mobility.<sup>14</sup> The appeal to religious authority has intensified with both the rise of mass media and mass education. As we have discovered in the United States, it is simply not true that television and video recordings must be the bearer of secularism. The point, however, is that the use of a historically constructed interpretation of Islam to enforce gender segregation does not imply that Islam in general or Islam in Arabia must be associated with an immutable form of gender relations.

This conclusion is clear when we examine trends in the other GCC states. Here, the relative absence of state enforced sex segregation has meant that some women have much more mobility. In the rest of the Gulf, an individual woman's autonomy results more from patriarchal choices within her family rather than the enforcement of the state. The resulting variety of women's experiences has led to a more rapid change in employment and fertility trends, although educational trends are similar in all countries.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

**Table 19**

Comparing Trends in Employment, Literacy, and Fertility  
1980 – 2000

	Increases in Women's Relative Presence in Labor Force*	Declines in Female Youth Illiteracy	Declines in Fertility Rate
Bahrain	80.8%	-78.6%	-46.2%
Kuwait	120%	-69.6%	-49.1%
Oman	176.9%	-60.9	-56.6%
Qatar	121.1%	-80%	-46.4%
Saudi Arabia	105.9%	-75%	-24.7%
UAE	175%	-72.7%	-40.7%

Source: Computed from World Bank, *Genderstats: Data Base of Gender Statistics* (devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats) Downloaded October 6, 2004.

**Conjectures about the Future**

Over the past twenty years, there has been a steady increase in the labor force participation of national Gulf women. Significant improvements in female educational status are connected to a substantial expansion of the numbers of women in professional occupations. The North American/European pattern of labor force feminization has thus been reversed. Instead of women first working more “proletarian” factory or office jobs, national women are first entering professional occupations. This is probably because it is easier for professional to work in sex-segregated environments providing health care and educational services. The Bahraini data also indicate that the most highly educated women might also have the strongest commitment to the labor force. In any event, the movement of national women into the labor market has likely already reduced somewhat the presence of expatriate workers in the economies of the Gulf.

The movement of young national women into lower paying occupations is much more likely to occur in the poorer Arabian countries such as Bahrain and Oman. Less

educated women in the richer oil states are more likely to resist entering this sector of the labor force, since there is little social or economic payoff associated with working in such occupations. Relatively poor Saudi Arabia would also appear likely to be ready for the replacement of expatriate workers by national women in clerical and sales occupations, but here state-enforced sex segregation seems so fundamental to the present Saudi state that the feminization of the labor force will depend on a substantial political opening. Given that the most powerful opposition to the rule of the Al Saud family is pushing for even harsher restrictions on the autonomy of women, we should not expect the labor force participation of women in Saudi Arabia to rise significantly.

These conjectures suggest that the GCC states will become increasingly differentiated. In the small energy rich states with high per capita GDP, we should see a significant increase in the proportion of highly educated national women in professional occupations. Given the high educational attainment of national women, we might even see within a generation more national women working in professional occupations than national men. In the poorer countries of Bahrain and Oman, this trend will include national women joining the ranks of clerical and sales workers. If such developments are to come to fruition, we should expect the absolute and relative numbers of expatriate workers employed in these countries to decline and the fertility rates of national women to continue to fall sharply.

On the other hand, movement towards a more integrated national workforce in Saudi Arabia is likely to be substantially delayed. While fiscal and social pressures might build for the replacement of expatriate workers by national citizens in all occupations, the process of Saudiization is likely to remain a male phenomenon. In the

largest country of the Arabian Peninsula, the increasing educational attainment of women will not translate into sharply lower fertility rates and higher rates of labor force participation. For the “quiet revolution “ of labor market feminization that is occurring the smaller Gulf countries to take place in Saudi Arabia, there will have to be a much “noisier” and more contentious political struggle.