

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE MODERN ARAB WORLD

**Enhancing
the Human Resource Development of
The League of Arab States**

An Overview

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FOREWORD

The following article is an extended version of a piece contributing to the League of Arab States' policy document 'Human Resource Development in the New Agenda'.

It is an overview and as such seeks to be a broad sketch of the issues of relevance rather than a detailed analysis of each member state and issues pertaining to it.

This overview looks to stimulate debate and discussion on issues that affect not only over 50% of the population of the Arab World directly, but also the populations of these countries as a whole. These issues are not exclusive to the Arab World but are also of relevance in varying degrees to the rest of the world today.

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WOMEN IN BUSINESS INTERNATIONAL

A not for profit company that started life by organising 'Women in Business in the Arab World', an Annual conference for Businesswomen from the UK and Middle East. Now in its 7th year, the initiative aims to promote and encourage business to business networking and the exchange of knowledge and skills between businesswomen from the UK and the Middle East, and the wider international business community. This successful business network also organises training in the Middle East encouraging the economic participation of women in national economies. The initiative boasts the highest of reputations, past speakers at its conferences and events have included :- Her Majesty Queen Rania of Jordan, Bahia Hariri of Lebanon, Shaikha Hisah Saad Al Sabah of Kuwait, Shaikha Hanadi Al Thani of Qatar, Shaikha Lubna Al Qassimi and Mrs Zanele Mbeki and also a number of leading figures from government and the international business community. As well as running Business Skills Training programmes, Women in Business and the Arab British Chamber of Commerce, have launched a joint membership benefits programme called Women in Business at the Chamber. Recently WIB organised the first Women in Business Sessions at the Jeddah Economic Forum.

All profits generated are reinvested in the programme of activities.

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THE ROLE OF WOMEN

ENHANCING HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ❖ Arab Countries have the culture, ability and resources to develop a harmonious society within their own remit.
- ❖ Discrimination issues within the Arab world are essentially no different to problems in the West, such as “the glass ceiling”.
- ❖ Increased birth rate amongst Arab Countries, partly due to better child mortality rates, but in the main, cultural desire for larger families.
- ❖ Increasing population of women as a result more girls being born and female mortality rates being lower than male.
- ❖ Higher proportion of population below the age of 16.
- ❖ Increasing emphasis on improved literacy amongst the population
- ❖ Increasing emphasis on urbanisation within countries.
- ❖ Increasing demand for secondary, and further, education for girls.
- ❖ Marriage gradually becoming an option past 21 years of age for more women.
- ❖ Potential incompatibility issues between men and women particularly if men do not empathise with, or support, changes in women’s expectations in marriage, work and society.
- ❖ Post education career demands by women placing an increased demand on the employment market.
- ❖ Single income households not sufficient to meet spending requirements of families because of economic inflation or material demands.
- ❖ De-stigmatisation of divorce has made divorce more common resulting in the creation of a potential requirement for financial independence of women either as one parent families or as single women.
- ❖ Requirement for older women to undergo occupational training.
- ❖ Self-employment, setting-up in business as an alternative to conventional career paths.
- ❖ Difficulties for Businesses are - difficulties in raising finance, no adequate incubator advice and training strategies.
- ❖ Issues of finance and advice can be resolved by the creation of support mechanisms.
- ❖ Need for greater female participation in Civil Society.
- ❖ Supportive legislation, encouraging women to be seen as statements of intent, still require public will to enforce.
- ❖ Major issue, is that the wide spread perception is that those articulate women are part of a privileged few, whose family and resources have contributed to their breaking the mould.
- ❖ Important that role models are role models and not gate keepers preventing development across social divides within the country.

INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult for any economy to develop to its full potential when half of its population is sidelined as an unproductive force.

All over the world, in varying degrees, women face economic marginalisation and repression. The situation is no different in the League of Arab States [LAS] whose member countries are also blinkered to the fact that women are a valuable economic resource potential, and that the development of women is vital if the potential of human resources is to be improved and exploited fully within their societies.

Encouraging and supporting the economic empowerment of women is the mission statement of Women in Business (WIB). This is achieved strategically and sensitively by respecting and working within the cultural confines of the countries within which WIB operates. The WIB programmes recognise and acknowledge the positive contributions made by women worldwide in the fields of Government, Social Development, Social Awareness and the Social Economy. Boasting seven years of experience and expertise in the field WIB has used its expertise to develop realistic programmes which tackle the role of women from both a broad, as well as a narrow, perspective. These keep in mind the social and economic hurdles that have to be overcome before the sustainable economic empowerment of women can be achieved. More importantly it must be appreciated that when WIB first embarked on its goals 7 years ago these hurdles were harder and higher to overcome.

A closer study of the LAS reveals that although the obstacles encountered by women are similar to those from other regions, a major difference is that women in LAS countries have the potential for more supportive institutions and networks at their disposal. It is important to remember that historically speaking Europe and America (the West) have had several centuries to deal with issues of economic and political empowerment of women. In fact, it is only over the past 90 years that there have been visible reductions in the restrictions against allowing women to compete equally in these arenas within the West.

Conversely in other regions – such as the LAS – some of the nation states have only been in existence for some 40 years or so; as these are still politically developing countries they still have some way to go before the concept of accepting women as equals in society is developed and embraced in the way that they are in the West.

WIB, therefore, supports the long-term impact assessment approach rather than the modern demands for instant solutions and results. WIB defines women's empowerment as being more practical than theoretical. For example a practical demonstration of equal access to opportunity for women instead of the usual political meandering without any concrete actions or sincerity of intent. Actually this has to be viewed as a holistic partnership process that must be signed up to by all social groups and men and women in order to create a more harmonious society.

For the purpose of this discourse the social and economic factors, which affect and influence the role of women, will be interrogated. These include legislation, education, healthcare, social welfare, social equity or employment.

The analysis will contain some general assumptions as space constraints do not allow for a detailed country-by-country approach but rather one that looks at the commonality of issues. Urban myths that influence how Arab women are perceived in the west will also be interrogated. Progress made in encouraging the economic role of women in the LAS will also be traced and suggestions made as to how any positive results can be sustained, maintained and further developed.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGES

Although the countries constituting the Arab region vary significantly - in area, population size, physical and ecological features, and levels of human development - they are unified, consciously or unconsciously, by a common language and a linked cultural heritage.

Culture and values are the soul of development. They provide its' impetus by facilitating the means needed to further it, and provide a definition for the vision of its purposes and ends. Culture and values are instrumental in that they help to shape people's daily hopes, fears, ambitions, attitudes and actions; but they are also formative because they mould people's ideals and inspire their dreams for a fulfilling life for themselves and future generations.

While there is some debate in Arab countries about whether culture and values promote or retard development, (which is often viewed in the context of a perceived inferiority and all the associated issues that goes with this complex), rather than a reassessment of whether these "values" have unconsciously been shifted and redefined giving into the onslaught of western cultures values and ethics.

It would be shameful to suggest that business, personal honour and equity are the products of western civilization or that these ethical values were absent from the LAS countries until the influence of 'outsiders'. Similarly in the case of women it would be erroneous to state that the case for equality and non-discrimination was merely being advocated from outside and that the utilization of the anti-discrimination practices within the culture and religion itself did not play a major role. It is now common debate within the LAS that the issue for greater recognition of the role of women is debated with reference to female icons of government, religion, philosophy which date back to the formative years of Islam.

An added consideration is the increasing urbanisation of the populus of these countries, which has led to changes in lifestyle bringing into play the universally shared issues of city life. Living in a rural society does not carry the expectations of material pressures and comforts, as does life in an urban

setting. In addition, the increased costs of urban living require a financial reality of requiring two incomes to support the demands of the 21st century world.

It could be effectively argued that urbanization has brought with it many of the social problems facing the major capitals of the world such as the breakdown of the family unit, the need for two income households, teenage delinquency and the like.

| Urbanization, by Arab country | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Urban population (less than 50%) | Urban population (50–80%) | Urban population (more than 80%) |
| Comoros | Algeria | Bahrain |
| Egypt | Djibouti | Kuwait |
| Morocco | Iraq | Lebanon |
| Somalia | Jordan | Libyan Arab Jamahiriya |
| Sudan | Mauritania | Oman |
| Yemen | Syrian Arab Republic | Qatar |
| | Tunisia | Saudi Arabia |
| | | United Arab Emirates |

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Values, it can be further argued, are not the servants of development but its masters. So often the panacea to the problems of social development can be found within the community itself.

Thus in the Gender scenario there are the very real issues of traditional expectations of a woman's role as mother and homemaker. This is based on the assumption that women are, by definition, required to prepare themselves intellectually and socially solely for the role formalized in the 'occupation' of Wife.

As a result there is a clear imbalance in the delivery of education for women and men within the system as a whole; and the non-requirement of any career or economic development role for women. This is the direct result of the fact that women are faced with fewer expectations than their male counterparts.

This typifies the traditional cultural perception of the role of women and the expectations considered around this prime role of women in society.

However, the arguments against this traditional perception are building up resulting in a shift in the thinking of all LAS members. Simply summarized, this has arguably been aided by Conservatist cultural interpretations. The use of religion as a debilitating force against women is often cited. The counter arguments of the role models of women since the time of the Prophet Mohammed – such as his very own businesswoman wife - have been conveniently sidelined or left out of the debate.

Women, faced by the economic realities of being both homemakers and income providers, have used the initial crack in opening the door of education

to push for more. This has to be done within their strengths and their position within the national culture. Organisationally these can take the shape of Mother's Unions such as those in North Africa. These are co-operatives whose broad agenda not only encompasses issues such as health but also encourage and support economic independence. These unions are more visible in the rural areas and due to the increased urbanization of the LAS have taken a limited hold.

The reality is that pursuing education in order to postpone the tradition of marrying young has, for some women, delayed their entry into the world of homemakers. Culturally they are perceived as being too old for marriage (although this ageist attitude is being challenged). The irony of this situation is that many of the families of these women actually support advanced education as they believe this will enhance the marriage prospects of their daughters ('the educated wife' or 'trophy wife').

However, this education is leading to demands and expectations for careers and employment as some women express the desire to utilize their skills and knowledge. This drastic change is catching men flat-footed as they are unable to come to terms with these changes. This, in turn, has created an environment of increasing incompatibility issues between the sexes as women garner a self-confidence that exists outside the reliance on marriage.

Married life is not necessarily providing the modern Arab woman with the intellectual and social enlightenment that they may yearn for and this, it can be argued, is contributing to the higher divorce statistics. The upside of this is that the more common occurrence of divorce has resulted in clearing away some of the cultural social stigma associated with divorce. With more divorces, the need for potential economic independence and self-sustainability has increased. Financial independence being the mantra, rather than husband dependency.

Thus there are many more women entering the job-market, either with skills or the requirement for employable skills, to meet their own financial needs. This desire for economic independence has had a snowball effect influencing the articulation of needs in other areas such as health provision, education.

Ultimately, there has been a breakdown of Gender taboos. But this has also resulted in a desire by LAS countries to speed up the integration of women into the mainstream thus providing future role models and allowing for the creation of support groups and networking opportunities.

However, it must also be appreciated that this articulation of women's empowerment is still the right of a privileged small percentage of the female population, who are fortunate to have the financial ability to benefit from further education and thereafter support themselves. Most importantly these are women who also may have the necessary contacts and family profile to help them gain access to these opportunities. A great deal of work still needs to be done to encourage and empower women in the lower income/social

groups (at grass roots level) to gain access to better education, healthcare and employment.

LEGISLATION

In order to support the developing role of women in society as a whole it is important that the Governments of the LAS members are seen to be supportive both in words and actions. Social welfare and social development can only be created within the domain of the law. Equality in legal terms will give a voice for equality of rights, responsibilities and opportunities for the participation of women in society, the workplace and within the family. One such positive example is in Egypt where it is enshrined in its constitution in Article 11 where it grants that women are equal to men in the political, social, cultural and economic spheres "without detriment to the rules of Islamic law". As such any analysis of the Legislation of member states should be viewed in detail as deficient where these principles are not being espoused.

While a lesson of Western political history would suggest that one can never legislate against discrimination. It is important that a legal framework exists within each state that legally enshrines the rights of women and men. Such laws will, as it does in the West, provide a monitor for good governance and act as a focal point for the implementation of national strategies.

In the main the legislative processes of the LAS would not necessitate any radical overhaul with respect to employment, family or educational issues, save for the inclusion of the protection of the rights of women. In fact, it is arguable that where in the West family and divorce law have developed, the Sharia system has allowed pre-nuptial agreements, protected the rights of female inheritance, and provided for female inheritance many centuries ago.

A key element for the increased role of women within the states of the LAS must be linked with participation in the political process, in civil society. There is a definite need for women to find greater expression in political life in order to influence the social, economic and legal decisions, which affect them. Many countries are active in encouraging such participation, while others will require to reassess their existing political processes to give the growing population of women a greater voice.

Once more there is the growing issue of giving access to these processes to the wider population of women. In the interim period this process will be for the benefit of those women from privileged family backgrounds and connections. The long-term impact of which will depend, as with all the issues discussed here, on whether there is a trickle down of these rights and liberties to the wider population.

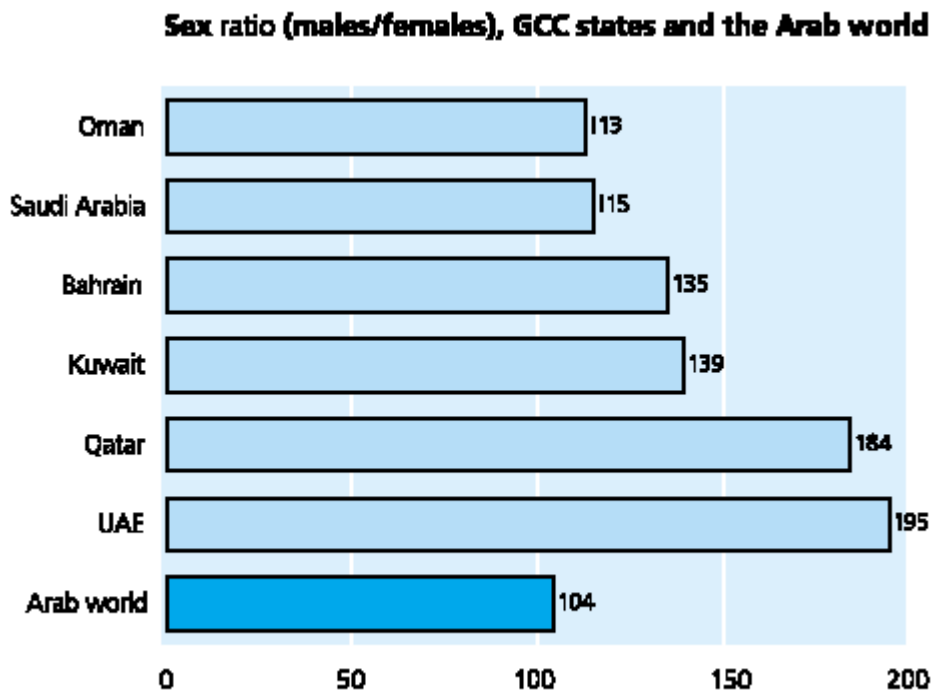
GENDER RATIO

The socio-economic changes that have affected the role of women can be seen, at a very simplistic level, as a result of the population growth. Life expectancy within the LAS has increased by about 15 years; the infant mortality rates for children under the age of five has fallen by an average of two-thirds within the majority of countries within the LAS. This improved expectancy of life, and therefore increased population, can be viewed as a logical increase in the female population.

In 2000 the total population for the members of the LAS was around 280 million. This figure is set to increase as the Arab world sees a population growth of between 1.1 to 4.1% compared to a global average of 1.4%. Additionally, evidence indicates a continued increase in the population with a regional fertility rate of 3.5 compared to a world average of 2.7 (World Bank figures).

Emerging from this backdrop are two particularly important trends - an increasing younger population and an increase in the female population - both of which create unique demands on the resources and attitudes of governments.

In the LAS countries the life expectancy for women tends to exceed that of men by about three years. The sex ratio in the LAS is 104 (see breakdown below) compared to a Global ratio of 102



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[The vagaries of the Gulf countries sex ratio is a reflection of the importation of non-indigenous work-force]

This increase in the population of women brings with it additional socio-economic demands. There is an increasing potential workforce of women that requires urgent consideration during the economic planning of the nation. Underpinning this will mean increasing demands on the education system and, of course, the health and welfare provisions to meet the requirements of the growing population of women. There is little sign of planning in many countries in the LAS to meet the needs of the growing population of women. There is the espoused aim to encourage women to play their role in the economy without any special projects or support mechanisms to formally recognise this integration. Thus an increase in the call for quotas, or affirmative action programmes, by some to encourage this integration. Additionally national budgets have not formally recognised the need for spending on education, healthcare and social programmes specifically for women.

EDUCATION

The beginning of the 21st century brings with it a definite increase in the literacy rate of women, not just in the LAS, but also on a global basis. However, this is relative as the position is still poor by world standards.

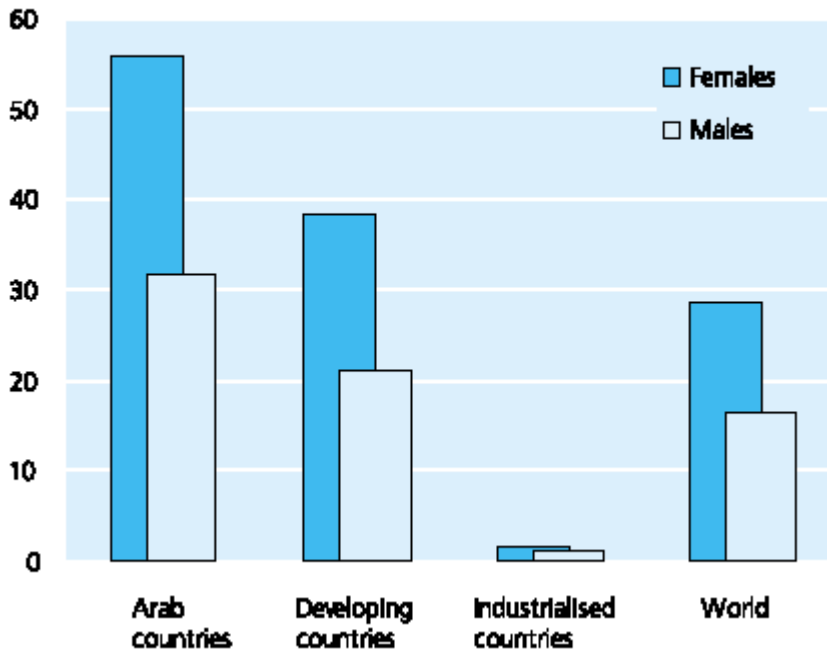
The consideration for female literacy lies in the positive view of the religion of Islam, which proclaims that educated mothers are the basis of a strong family foundation. This laudable aim has been a part of the culture for over 1500 years but tends to be seen as an optional, rather than a social, imperative.

In the case of women it is recognised that better educated women provide for a more informed audience with respect to health and the general well being of women in society as mothers, wives and citizens.

The key trigger for economic development amongst nations in growth and equality is education. Global estimates indicate that a 1% increase in the labour force that has had the benefits of a secondary education is associated with a 6-15 % variable increase in the share of income received by the poorest 40 % of the population.

In the case of women, illiteracy should be seen in the wider context of not just basic numeracy and literacy skills, but also on a strategic basis through community colleges in work based skills that are useable in later life. A positive example of this is the UNDP/UNIFEM funded project in Jordan. This project aims to provide and encourage the development of employable skills amongst women.

**Illiteracy rate (%) by gender,
Arab countries and selected world regions, 1995**



Reproduced courtesy of UNDP – Arab Human Development Report

The increasing emphasis on Arabisation, assisted through educational support, is the future economic dividend that can be reaped through an increasingly educated work force.

In the LAS, it has been estimated that towards the end of 1990 the total enrolment in tertiary education had risen from 31 million to 56 million across the LAS. Specifically, over 90 percent of males were in primary education, compared to 75 percent of females. In secondary education this male-female gap is closer, with 60 percent of males compared with 50 percent of females.

It is important that the content of primary and secondary education syllabi be of equal quality and depth for both male and females to ensure that attendance at schools is not just lip service for the pupils.

This educational enfranchisement creates expectations on employment and rights within society, adding to the pressure in the region as occupational expectations are encouraged by educational qualifications or even just the access to further education.

EMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The population growth is adding some six million labour force entrants every year. Job creation is not matching the growth of the work force. This is further exacerbated by a reliance on third country national guest workers. The wealthier members of the LAS have created a situation where the lack of work ethic, drive and dynamism of its nationals in the employment market has

become the rationale for their high reliance on non-national labour not just for what are considered as 'dirty jobs' but also for white collar occupations.

Within the LAS, this issue is compounded by a 'Brain Drain' of talent to the 'financial fleshpots' both in Western as well as Gulf countries. The net effects of this are not positive for the growth and development of the local economy - unless one regards as positive the remittance of expatriate income to the homeland particularly in the case of Arab workers. In the case of Egypt, in particular, there is a major concern that its talented Doctors, Nurses and other professionals are, once educated, being led to build their careers and lives outside the country. Any such remittances, however, are not necessarily in the form of investment but rather capital expenditure in the homelands and on imported goods. Here there is also another deprivation for a country such as Egypt, in that the participation of this educated populace within the social and civil development of the country that they are leaving is lost. Thus depriving the country of an organic force for social, political and cultural development.

With respect to employment, one can see that as with Europe and America the mainstreaming of gender in national development strategies and plans can create an atmosphere to encourage greater female participation.

Removing gender bias in labour markets, especially gender-based occupational segregation, can reverse the feminisation of unemployment. Women would therefore be able to work alongside men in all occupations. However, the additional cultural constraint in some countries that frown on men and women working together needs also to be considered.

Countries such as Syria, Iraq and Egypt have always prided themselves on higher levels of literacy amongst women in their countries compared to other Arab states. Equally in employment they have many role models working across the board in a variety of economic activities.

For example a comparative study of Egypt (as indicated in the table below) will show that in real terms, percentages permitting, that there are certain professions and activities which like the West does not attract women. Furthermore as already noted above there is a strong indication that as the table is an indicator of the domestic Egyptian market profile of employment; figures of women in certain occupations would be higher if we were to include in the statistics those Egyptian women working abroad.

Proportion of individuals by employment sector, and proportion of men and women for each sector, 1999

| Economic Activities | Men | Women | Total |
|---|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Agriculture, Hunting and Forestry | 22 | 5.9 | 28.0 |
| Fishing | 0.7 | - | 0.7 |
| Mining and Quarrying | 0.3 | - | - |
| Manufacturing | 11.3 | 1.8 | 13.2 |
| Electricity, Gas and Water | 1.1 | 0.1 | 1.2 |
| Construction | 7.8 | 0.1 | 7.9 |
| Wholesale and Retail Trade, Personal and Household Goods | 10.4 | 1.7 | 12.1 |
| Transport, Storage and Communication | 1.5 | 0.3 | 1.8 |
| Financial Intermediation | 6 | 0.2 | 6.3 |
| Real estate, Renting, Business Activities | 0.9 | 0.2 | 1.1 |
| Public Administration and Defence, Compulsory Social Security | 1.4 | 0.2 | 1.6 |
| Education | 7.7 | 2.0 | 9.7 |
| Health and Social Work | 6.3 | 4.2 | 10.5 |
| Other Community, Social and Personal Service Activities | 1.5 | 1.6 | 3.2 |
| Private Household with Employed Persons | 2 | 0.1 | 2.1 |
| Community, Social and Personal Services | 0.2 | - | 0.2 |
| TOTAL | 81.3 | 18.7 | 100 |

Source: Laborsta, from the Labour Force Survey

Thus, women tend to be concentrated in what are generally perceived as women's occupations. There are potential options with working from home, or 'home-workers', but this tends to be exploitative of low wage rates. However, the attraction of women to modern career sectors such as Information Technology, IT industry, may be a good opportunity to start on an equal footing as this new business sector does not carry with it any historical prejudices. New businesses, such as Call Centres, have yet to succeed in the Middle East, because essentially LAS governments have failed to appreciate the technical (telecommunications and IT) and human resource training infrastructure required to set-up these Centres. Exceptionally Dubai has

addressed these issues of infrastructure, both IT and manpower, effectively. This is an opportunity lost since many other states fail to appreciate the role that Call Centres can play in providing women with a safe (and potentially all women) working environment.

A woman's capabilities can be better matched with labour market demand by effectively addressing gender gaps in the quality and relevance of education and skill-training programmes. In April 2000 the World Bank's update on West Bank and Gaza showed that women made up only 15% of the labour force compared with 23% in Jordan and 29% in Egypt. Within the context of occupational mobility, a very small percentage of this figure would be in management type jobs; but rather concentrated in the service and tourism sector.

In Dubai women make up some 18% of higher management positions. This figure is encouraging and is indicative of the positive support of the Government of Dubai in this respect. This figure is expected to increase over the coming years as there are forward looking plans to encourage women in the work place based on meritocracy and with a strong bias looking to ensure that Emirati women form the bulk of this percentage.

The Gulf countries face unique problems in encouraging women to become part of the work force. Not only do they have to battle with the problems of creating and encouraging localization or indigenisation of the workforce and creating a working culture amongst nationals, but also they have to hold the reins on the dynamism of women to achieve in the work place so as not to upset conservative elements in society.

With this respect Bahrain has not had that much difficulty as its economy is built less on the largess of oil, but astutely the natural resources of its people. Thus women are seen as part of the work force although they are not spared the discriminatory issues associated with gender equality experienced by women globally.

The 'Brain Drain' element is more visual in the other members of the LAS where female talent is not limited to occupational mobility, but geographical mobility in order to achieve a desired career path. A cursory glance of any international bank in the region or public relations, marketing company or Media Company will see a female pan-arab workforce.

Within and outside the workplace, there is a demand for training and skills programmes. This is often the result of women striving to maintain a standard that is often far higher than the norm in the male dominated management structures. It is not uncommon for those in a discriminated class to tend to be over qualified to achieve the basic rungs of the corporate ladder. This phenomenon is evidenced in Europe particularly with racial minorities trying to combat discrimination at the work place and to justify their positions on the corporate ladder. Thus there is a thirst for self-improvement and a motivating force among women that is not often seen amongst their male colleagues.

The Women in Business free programme, Business Skills, is an active example of women participating to gain knowledge, which will help to bolster their abilities and encourage confidence and self-belief. The programme has conducted eight workshops spread over two years with over 1000 participants. A small but much needed practical support mechanism. Programmes have been carried out in Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, UAE and Morocco. The programmes, soon to be MBA accredited, provide a confidence booster and forum for women to meet to discuss these issues. This knowledge exchange has proved beneficial for women starting their own business both for the sharing of skills and also for the inspiration to develop and maintain their own network.

It is this confidence building aspect that is also crucial to the development of the role of women. Without this psychological boost to self-esteem and belief in their own abilities to achieve, the drive and motivation for these women will be diminished and the mountain that they have to climb to be allowed to play a role in society will become higher.

Part of this process and an increasing choice is that of self-employment as it is sometimes referred to in the UK. Being your own boss has its own appeal, but for women it provides a unique independence to be able to manage their own time as they juggle family, career, and personal needs. It is also a way of bypassing the prejudices of employers and difficulties experienced at the workplace. Unlike Europe, this is not a difficult mind change because in the Arab world commerce and trade is imbued in the blood.

A notable example of such entrepreneurial spirit is the mother of seven in Palestine who turned her front room into a shop to sell goods and groceries. She used the profits to fund her education.

Nevertheless, the path to the creation of a successful business can be a thorny one with glaring practical difficulties to overcome. The Intilaaqua Project in Oman, co-funded by Shell, is a positive example of the concept of 'handholding' of new ventures till they reach a level of maturity or self-sustainability. This project is a good example of the private sector, not just funding social programmes, but providing its own skills resources to add value to the advice and assistance given in the programme. There needs to be equilibrium for such social programmes between donations of money and donations of expertise and knowledge for such programmes to be effective.

There are issues of raising formal credit. This is often only available to those who are better off or from the 'right background'. The less well off are asset deprived and as such have no collateral. Micro-credit is a useful option, as is the potential of special funds. But often there is a lack of local capacity to deliver this. An example of capacity building in this field is the UNIFEM Rural Women's Groups and Credit project in Jordan.

There are few other examples of national bodies providing such support. This is reflected as an 'aid' culture approach to help women rather than as an issue for the countries themselves to resolve. There is still small movement by

some of the banks in the region to specifically encourage and support the advent of women into business.

A good example of a foresighted initiative in this area is the Qatar Ladies Investment Company. This is not only an investment arm of women's savings but has the ethical brief to support women developing their business.

As well as finance, there are issues of lack of support of Business Skills, the knowledge base required to support and encourage the 'wouldbe entrepreneur'. Once again, the need for the training and support that the WIB skills programme provides is minuscule when compared to the actual demand. This thirst for knowledge should be satiated by using existing resources of higher education establishments and community colleges providing access to all sections of the community.

If there is a failing in the LAS, it is in the lack of support mechanisms and mentoring for new businesses. It is essential that an incubator approach be looked at to ensure that the fledgling businesses are nurtured and encouraged before being left to survive in, what is in reality, a very closed and competitive market. Support can include IT skills, marketing advice, guidance with legal bureaucracy and management skills. If these were to be addressed, they would add up to the greater sum of confident and sound entrepreneurs.

The above needs are not unique to the LAS, but are identified perennials faced the world over. However, with the Arab World some of these obstacles could be minimized while others are more difficult to achieve due to the cultural realities.

One such reality is the issue of family support. The support of encouragement of close family and husbands is essentially to counteract any negative social connotations. This is applicable both for women seeking employment or self-employment. The stigma and innuendoes associated with a woman interacting alone with men during the course of her working life can deter women from becoming active within the economy. Added to this is the erroneous belief that working women will neglect their children, therefore the encouragement of the family is essential, not only to detract from this negative gossip, but also to act as a supportive mechanism to the working woman.

URBAN MYTHS

Here are some myths in the Middle East that abound which are used by both conservatives and critics of Arab culture in the West which we feel need to be scrutinized.

Women do not have any influence in Society.

The role of women as mothers and wives within the family unit cannot be over emphasized. The oft spoken cliché that they have influence over the future mindset of men is a truism. It may be gradual, but to paraphrase a leading

thinker in the Gulf – “each successive generation of motherhood is moving the goal posts as they wish their children a different life to theirs”.

Women in the Middle East are without ability.

Those that have developed share the stage equally - or on a higher level - with their male counterparts. Examples of such women include Shaikha Lubna Al Qassimi, the managing director of Tejari.com. ; another example are the Olayan sisters in Saudi Arabia who manage the Olayan business empire on a local and international basis commanding a company estimated at the value of \$20bn. Added to the list are the women who are full board members of BNP, Credit Lyonnaise in Morocco; or the woman in Lebanon who after her divorce got a job and went on to set up a thriving media company making TV programmes for MBC and LBC; or there is the lady in Morocco who owns and actively manages a fleet of trawlers, even filling in as a captain whenever required. However, with the exception of a few, there is the criticism that these examples are from the privileged of society and are not representative of the average woman in the Middle East. While this may be generally true, it is recognized that these women are role models for inspiration and that their success is also part of the process of cultural acceptance for women to be more high profile in society.

A leading scion of the Jeddah business community recently remarked that the ability of his daughters was far in excess of that of his sons; so much so that it is an acceptable, if not essential fact of life that running the family business empire was a question of ability rather than gender.

Women do not have any economic power in society.

In the Middle East the women as the consumer is recognized as being important to marketers. The disposable income available to women and their influence on household purchase is the key to increased interest in the female spending power. This anecdotally reflected in marketing and advertising across all products and services as they are pitched at the woman consumer. In Saudi Arabia, for example, some \$25billion of the bank deposits belong to women.

Businesswomen are few in the Middle East.

There is a growing group of self-developing businesswomen in the region. It is widely held that some 40% of businesses in Saudi Arabia are in the hands of women. Recent figures from Dubai show that over one third of recent new business registrations have been made by women. In Egypt women constitute 17% of private business owners.

CONCLUSIONS

While the desire for women to take an equal part in the economic development of their countries is gaining momentum, there are practicalities and concerns that need to be addressed if the momentum building up within the Arab World is to be maintained.

The whole issue of the role of women is becoming highly politicized and regrettably, in some instances, there is more of a vying for the platform of the women's leader rather than a desire to affect the plight of the ordinary woman.

Additionally there are a growing number of women's conferences, forums and groups in the region. For these groups and initiatives to grow and make a difference, they must be seen to be proactive, dynamic and energetic in the manner of the women that they seek to serve. More importantly they must work together strategically rather than competitively, working for the greater good rather than self-interest. A partnership approach will ensure that these resources are not only maximized in their benefits; but more importantly as a strategic method of meeting the variable needs of women as a community.

The access to support, education and training should be made available to all social and economic groupings in society and not to a select few. There is a perception that such access is available to a privileged social strata and not the community as a whole. If women are to take an active role in the countries of the LAS then there should be the policy strap line for all governments to pursue – "equal access for all "

Moreover, the potential misuse of the gender issue must be stopped at the outset. By this we mean that it must be recognized that it is not a competition to be the most progressive Arab state for women nor is it a race to assume the mantle of the leader for Arab women; such a single-minded approach fails to recognize the diversity within the League of Arab States and the need to harness the co-operation between rich and poor members to develop a more socially and economically advanced region.

A community approach is very much in keeping with the ethos of the League of Arab States and a strategic approach with this in mind would lead to unified approach to growing social dilemmas.

The role for individualistic groups and national governments must be to consolidate their support for women's issues and to take a strategic role to positively help women in social provision, education, employment and self-awareness. Part of the issue is to provide a 'can do' practical approach delivering support in the form of financial assistance, seed funding, business development advice, ongoing mentoring, self-awareness and confidence building programmes. This may, in turn, need the support of legislation that enshrines these rights and respects the role of women in society. These are all very important and essential elements for social engineering.

The social and political imperative is the need to work as a nation as a whole to create a unitary and harmonious society of men and women working together to build a better society and economically prosperous region engineered by Arabs for Arabs. Only this way will the agenda for increasing the greater role of women in society be as a result of cultural support and development and not be driven by external agendas which tend to be built on alternative perceptions of society by western thinkers. These perceptions are by the admission are creating as many problems as they solve, and the grand proclamations of civil rights and liberties are being seen as implemented with many provisos.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Ms Hamed is of Palestinian parents. Born in Riyadh, brought up between the Middle East and United Kingdom, she has a unique insight in the social and economic development of the region.

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Ms Hamed has written and advised on politics, social development and on the role of women in the Middle East for Women in Business over the last 4 years. She is actively involved in NGO's and charities supporting children and social welfare programmes in the Middle East.

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Formerly seconded to the Department of Trade and Industry of the British Government (Trade Partners UK) as its Trade and Investment Advisor advising on UK trade to Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Libya. This included advising Marks & Spencer on franchise strategy in the Middle East.

An International Lawyer has worked in Switzerland specialising as private corporate and legal advisor to high net individuals. He has managed companies under insolvency restrictions and at various stages of the industrial process; one such example being a furniture manufacturing operation in Dublin.

With extensive experience in the public sector, has advised Members of Parliament, Central and Local Government and International Governments on a wide range of policy issues; his policy papers have been over a wide-range of social and societal development issues. Mr Suleiman was the special advisor to the Chief Executive of The Community Foundation, contributing to its books on Community Economic Development. In the 1990, he formed the Public Affairs. Company – Politikplus, which served many blue-chip clients advising on a range of issues from cultural diversity to embryo research, to political participation and social democratisation, and international affairs.

Ahmed is also Middle East Consultant to the Centre for International Briefing. In 1997 Ahmed was awarded an MBE for services to Middle East Export in the Queen's Birthday Honours List.

He founded the Women in Business Initiative in 1997, which has now become a leading training and business networking initiative between the UK and Middle East and growing to an international forum.

In 2001 he founded the All Party Parliamentary Friends of Islam Group (the first time that such a group has been formed in the history of UK Parliament).