

# Chapter 56

## Arab Gulf Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines the challenges facing women's careers in the Arab Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) countries. It suggests strategies to increase the number of females in leadership positions. A systematic literature review establishes current findings, as well as future needs in the understanding of factors impacting women's career progression in leadership positions. This chapter contributes knowledge on issues of women's career advancement in the Arab GCC countries. It is relevant to decision makers and Human Resource Development (HRD) practitioners as they utilize women's talents and promote equal opportunity in the workplace.*

*To become leaders, women must navigate through the labyrinth, overcoming barriers and dead ends along the way. Ideally, there would be no labyrinth, and women and men would have the same paths to leadership. But, the male path is more direct, and the female one more labyrinthine. (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 161)*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Within the last two decades, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has transformed economically, politically, and socially (Ali, 2009). The governments of these countries have played a significant role in accelerating social change through infrastructure (physical structures and basic social services) and the status of women through education and economic participation (The World Bank, 2005). The GCC government has introduced several gender-equality programs and policies to promote female employment (Gassan et al, 2015; Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2005; United Nations Development Programme, 2015). Yet, these changes have not resulted in an equal increase in women's participation in the labor force (United Nations Development Programme, 2015).

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Women in the workplace within GCC countries struggle under patriarchal, male-dominated hierarchies and traditional values that shape perceptions of appropriate divisions of labor (Abalkhail & Allan, 2016; Abdalla, 2006; Al-Lamk, 2007; Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Mostafa, 2005; Omair, 2008). According to the Arab Human Development Report (United Nations Development Programme, 2015), the gender gap in education is narrowing and female participation in employment has increased. However, with a total of less than 25%, female participation in GCC economic activities remains low compared to other countries (World Economic Forum, 2016). Still, women in GCC countries have become visible in management, and a small number have been rising through organizational hierarchies toward top positions (Abalkhail & Allan, 2015; Karam & Afiouni, 2014). It should be noted that statistical comparison is complicated because there is no agreed upon definition for top managers. For example, statistics from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have grouped legislators, senior officials, and managers into one category instead of three separate categories (United Nations Development Programme, 2015). Additionally, some countries do not record statistics regarding the percentage of women at different management levels (Burke, 2017).

Research on women's career development, which was based predominantly on Western North American and Western European contexts, reported that global organizations have few women in roles of elite leaders and top executives (Acker, 2009; Bagilhole & White, 2011; Broadbridge, 2010; Cooper Jackson, 2001; Davidson & Burke, 2012; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Oakley, 2000; Powell, 2000, 2010; Schein, 2001, 2007; Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). Little attention has been paid to problems and issues confronting women managers in the GCC (Abalkhail & Allan, 2016; Metcalfe, 2006; Moghadam, 2005; Omair, 2008). Knowledge on women managers in the GCC is limited since reliable conclusions on causes of gender differences in managerial advancement differ from those in developed countries. There is little knowledge about the future of women in the GCC, particularly when considering volatile oil prices in the Gulf.

The chapter begins with a brief background and emphasizes the sociocultural set-up of the Gulf countries. It will highlight the influence of religion and culture on the status of women. Next, a theoretical explanation regarding women, leaders, and the career labyrinth will be presented. This will be followed by a review of challenges facing women as managers in GCC countries. Then, the chapter will discuss strategies to navigate the career labyrinth to leadership positions. This chapter will conclude with a discussion on future research.

## **A BACKGROUND OF GCC COUNTRIES**

An examination of the broader sociocultural, political, and economic patterns in the Gulf countries is important in understanding women's careers and Human Resources Development (HRD) (Karam & Afiouni, 2014). The GCC, established in 1981, includes six countries: (1) Bahrain; (2) Kuwait; (3) Oman; (4) Qatar; (5) Saudi Arabia; and (6) the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (GCC, 2017). Based on a similar political system, the establishment consists of both Islamic beliefs and strong cultural values (GCC, 2017). According to the UNDP (2015) and the World Economic Forum (2016), the GCC's 2016 populations varied from 1,377.24 million (in Bahrain) to 31,540.37 million (in Saudi Arabia), with migrants totaling 10 million. Other GCC countries also host large expatriate populations with more than half the total populations consisting of migrants. The female to male population ratio is highest in Saudi

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