

Wom Leade



Have governments been quicker than corporations to recognize and reward talented women? Yes, but the Middle East still has a long way to go.

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In this Debates on the value of diversity and the empowerment and advancement of women have raged for centuries, but when it comes to gender equality, few achievements can compare with the rising role of women in government worldwide.

Paths To Power, a March 2010 report by Deloitte and Forbes Insights, reveals that women worldwide are rapidly advancing in the public sector, making government a leading example for businesses. The study reported that women hold chief executive and presidential positions in only 3% of the world's top 1,000 companies, yet almost 10% of United Nations countries now have women heads of state, a huge increase from the three female heads of state in 1975. Women also hold about 20% of parliamentary seats worldwide, nearly double that of 1995's 11.3%. However, only 9.4% of all jobs than higher Vice President at Fortune 500 companies are women.

Women are advancing faster in government than in business, but some countries are advancing faster than others and the report makes clear that women continue to have a low political impact in most parts of the world.

A Middle East Snapshot

In the Middle East, women are entering the field of politics and government in growing numbers, yet their gains have been uneven and their leadership often goes unrecognized. They continue to be significantly underrepresented in senior positions in politics as well as in the private sector and in some countries they are completely absent from the judiciary.

Women in the Middle East have been at the core of governments' development work for a number of years, a very needed focus as on average, only 28% of the adult female population in the Middle East is economically active, the lowest rate in the world. While

this statistic is consternating, in nearly all Middle Eastern countries, women today are better represented and are beginning to play a more prominent role in the workplace than was the case in the year 2000. This appears to be the result of increased literacy and educational opportunities, slowly changing cultural attitudes and in some countries, government policies aimed at reducing dependence on foreign labor.

In Bahrain and the UAE, the first women judges were appointed in 2006 and 2008, respectively. In other countries, such as Oman and Bahrain, the government has appointed an increasing number of women to unelected positions, including cabinet and diplomatic posts.

Significant steps have been made to improve the status of women over the last five years, and 15 out of 18 countries in the region have recorded some gains. The GCC countries have demonstrated the greatest degree of improvement, shrinking the gap between them and the rest of the region on some issues. The most significant achievement occurred in Kuwait, where women received the same political rights as men in 2005, enabling them to vote and run for office and paving the way for the election of the country's first female members of parliament in 2009. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), eight women were appointed and one secured election to the 40-member Federal National Council (FNC), an advisory body to the rulers of the seven emirates. In Bahrain and the UAE, the first women judges were appointed in 2006 and 2008, respectively. In other countries, such as Oman and Bahrain, the government has appointed an increasing number of women to unelected positions, including cabinet and diplomatic posts. In Egypt, to increase women's representation in the legislature, a gender-based quota system for the lower house of parliament was passed in 2009 and is scheduled

for implementation in 2010. A quota for women was introduced for municipal elections in Jordan and Lebanon among other countries in the region. In general, women have become more visible participants in public life, education and business throughout the region, including Saudi Arabia.

Progress is occurring, but at a pace that is still too slow.

More progress in the public sector in the Middle East will serve as a model for the private sector.

A critical mass of women in leadership begets more women in leadership. Evidence suggests that once female representation reaches critical mass -- commonly cited figures hover around one-third as the tipping point -- their shared interests as women emerge. Countries where efforts to include women at the highest levels of government have been most successful have reaped rewards in the private sector as well.

There is a need to harness and continue to mine the wealth of female talent to improve the competitiveness of Middle Eastern countries

Talent is the most important natural resource a nation can possess and knowledge is the most valuable currency in the 21st century economy. Therefore, it is key to continue to advance the most talented women to decision-making levels as women are rapidly matching,



40% of the workforce is women



11% of the 195 nations have female heads of state

3% of CEOs of top 1000 multinational corporations are women

or overtaking, men in terms of education in many parts of the world. More women than men in many countries in the Middle East are now likely to attend university, in some countries, by a wide margin. There are more women entrepreneurs, more women doctors, more women Ph.D.s, and more women in universities than ever before. However, substantial roadblocks remain for women pursuing careers. Participation by women in senior roles translates to greater financial rewards in both public and private sectors: The top 500 multinational firms, which had at least three women on their boards, saw a 16.7% return on equity while average companies just saw an 11.5% return.

The greater the number of women, the greater the difference -- those with the greatest number of women on their boards had 53 percent greater return on equity than those with the fewest.

Organizations in the public sector in the Middle East can address gender disparity through different tools.

- Establish metrics -- recruitment rates, promotion rates, turnover rates, assignment and leadership appointments, etc.
- Create an institutional approach to the advancement and retention of women
- Promote work-life integration
- Develop career networks
- Make senior leadership support visible and often communicated
- Implement quotas
- Create critical mass

It is not enough to hold public office

Capacity-building for governance is essential not only for women but for men as well. It is not enough to be elected or to be appointed to government service without the ability to exercise that responsibility effectively. To address this need, Middle East governments need to invest in programs to strengthen the skills and leadership abilities of women and men parliamentarians and other elected officials.

Middle East governments as leading example for businesses

Women’s progress has vital implications for the health and growth of governments, companies – and nations. On the frontlines of moderation, women are often the strongest advocates for positive political, economic, educational, legal and social reform. There are still few female role models in our region to encourage younger generations and entry barriers like gender prejudice, cultural pressures and a lack of resources often stand in the way. However, as evidenced by other countries’ experiences, the public sector in the Middle East can lead the way and be the role model for the private sector in reaping the benefits of women’s advancement.

By **Rana Salhab**, Talent Leader