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The Future of Women Leaders in the Middle East

A number of high-profile women are chipping at the “cement ceiling” in the Gulf countries and making it possible for others to do the same.

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THE FUTURE OF WOMEN LEADERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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AND MAKING IT POSSIBLE FOR OTHERS TO DO THE SAME.

BY DEANNE AGUIRRE, MELISSA MASTER CAVANAUGH,
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When Sheikha Lubna Al Qassimi stepped into

a role as head of IT strategy for transport services company Dubai Ports World, she was an anomaly in many ways. She was an engineer working on a complex, technical initiative that required a great deal of interaction with the members of the C-suite; a local from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) working with a large number of expatriates; and a female executive in the male-dominated maritime industry. "I was the first senior woman coming on board, and it was a tough challenge," she says. "I would have to explain to executives how I was going to deliver, and there was always a question: 'How much can I rely on you?'"

To build the needed trust, she says, she learned the terminology of the maritime industry and learned how to present IT projects to senior executives in a way that showed the project's value to the business. But ultimately, what really established her credibility was the delivery of an IT system that supported the day-to-day operation of the company's ports. "For women to be accepted, they have to be trusted, and they have to be overachievers," she says. "The bottom line is whether you can deliver dollars — or dirhams. You have to prove that it doesn't matter, gender-wise, who sits there."

Now the minister of foreign trade for the UAE and the most powerful woman in the Arab world, according to the *Forbes* 2010 list of the world's 100 most powerful women, Al Qassimi is no longer an anomaly. She is one of a small but significant group of women who are defying expectations and making a difference in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

The political developments in the Middle East this year have focused the world's attention on the region.

But another form of change — slower, less visible, and more pervasive — has been under way for some time among women in the GCC. When observers around the world look at the progress of women in the GCC, they tend to focus on the difference between these countries and those in North America and Europe. And, indeed, there are gaps: Only about 36 percent of women in the GCC work outside the home, compared with about 75 percent of women in countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Women from GCC countries remain a minority in the workforce, especially in the private sector — in Saudi Arabia, for example, Saudi women accounted for less than 1 percent of the private-sector workforce in 2009. (They were better represented within the government, where they made up 30 percent of employees in 2008.) Women from Qatar made up 2.6 percent of that country's workforce, public and private, in 2008. On a 2010 World Economic Forum index of gender equality in 134 countries, the six countries of the GCC were all ranked below 100, ranging from 103 (UAE) to 129 (Saudi Arabia).

If the nations of the GCC are to continue their own advancement in an increasingly competitive world, they will need to engage the energy, knowledge, and skills of their entire population, including the female half. In this respect, the Gulf countries are not unlike other emerging markets, where conservative cultures have for generations kept women from being economically active, and where their integration into the workforce has encountered numerous obstacles. A recent study from the Center for Work–Life Policy found that women in the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and the UAE are often held back in their careers by gen-

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der bias, elder-care responsibilities, and issues of travel and safety, such as cultural constraints on women traveling alone. However, nearly 1 billion women worldwide are rapidly becoming economically empowered, and their energy needs to be properly channeled. (See “The Third Billion,” by DeAnne Aguirre and Karim Sabbagh, *s+b*, Summer 2010.)

If governments and companies in the GCC can create an institutional environment in which women can reach their full potential, as well as find the right combination of incentives and policies to keep individual women engaged, the region might provide a powerful example to the rest of the world — hence the importance of the example set by the women who are playing active roles in business and government in the GCC today. Few outside the region are familiar with the remarkable advances these countries have made in just a generation. It is a difficult evolution to quantify, because little comprehensive data is available at the regional level concerning the roles women have taken on. Within the GCC, however, women's increasing participation at all levels of the workforce is widely recognized — and more and more celebrated. As government ministers, CEOs, and regulators, women are playing a crucial role in driving these countries' economic and social development, and opening the door for other women who hope to do the same.

We interviewed a representative sample of eight women in senior positions in the public and private sectors in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE — exploring their career paths, their motivations, and their recommendations for creating the institutions that will allow more women to succeed. The stories of these highly visible women provide insight into the needs and aspira-

tions of the far larger group of women who will have a significant impact on the GCC's workforce in the years to come.

An article published last year, “Measures of Leadership” (by Joe Saddi, Karim Sabbagh, and Richard Shediak, *s+b*, Summer 2010), took a similar approach in providing an overview of the qualities critical for successful leaders in the GCC. Our intent is not to suggest that women leaders are a separate breed: Indeed, the women interviewed for this article exhibit all the traits outlined in “Measures of Leadership.” But women who achieve success in a traditionally male-dominated culture also have other qualities in common — qualities of particular importance for the young women of the GCC who will lead the next generation. Specifically, although their backgrounds and career paths vary, the women who are breaking boundaries in the GCC all share three things.

Constant improvement. A refusal to accept the status quo, in themselves, their organization, or their region. This manifests itself in unending evaluation and improvement.

Studied discomfort. A willingness to go outside their comfort zone, professionally and personally, particularly when taking on new challenges that would benefit their organization.

Quiet confidence. A certainty in their own abilities and a recognition that when they are inevitably called upon to substantiate the value of their work, they will be prepared.

By cultivating these qualities in younger women, and creating an environment in which they can display them, today's leaders can encourage a new generation to be ready to take their place.

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Constant Improvement

The women making strides in the Gulf states today are emblematic of the countries themselves, which could easily have spent the next several decades allowing their oil revenues to propel their development. Instead, these countries are stretching themselves to build knowledge economies. Similarly, women leaders are constantly questioning their society’s expectations of them and pushing themselves to achieve more, personally and professionally, than many people expected.

Sheikha Hanadi Al Thani recalls that when she attended high school, few people believed academics would matter much for her or her classmates, because most of them would marry within a few years and then stay home. “This was the expectation from everyone around me,” Al Thani says. “But if you only believe what others see in you, then you might as well just lie back and play dead.”

Al Thani went on to Qatar University, where she studied economics and graduated only to find that no one would give her a job. She got a master’s degree from the London School of Economics, returned to Doha, and found that she was still unemployable. “We talk about glass ceilings, but I was facing a cement ceiling,” she says. “It’s not legal, it’s not social — it’s a multitude of things that you cannot unravel.”

To keep busy, she began writing papers for the general public about household finances, noting that the government’s welfare state had led people to abdicate responsibility for their own money — for instance, few households knew how to budget, and most did not invest their savings. These papers drew the attention of Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Al Missned, the wife of the current emir of Qatar (who at the time was the

heir apparent). The two women agreed that the sense of complacency that had taken hold within families was bad for the country — and Al Missned asked Al Thani what she planned to do about it.

That question launched the Qatar Ladies Investment Company in 1998, a small, family-focused investment bank that today is known as Amwal, Qatar’s leading investment banking and asset management firm. It also launched Al Thani’s career: As Amwal’s founder, she still holds the position of chairman, but she is also the CEO of Al Wa’ab City, a residential and commercial development in Doha; deputy CEO of NBKS, a family conglomerate with investments in construction, oil and gas, broadcasting, information technology and communication, hospitality, and real estate, among other sectors; and a board member of the International Arab Women’s Association, Dana Gas, and Injaz Al-Arab, a nonprofit organization that encourages entrepreneurship among Arab youth.

The common thread among these activities is a desire to improve Qatar’s future. “This golden age of the Gulf has established our infrastructure and our worldwide position, but it has bred complacency,” Al Thani says. “How did we kill innovation and entrepreneurship in ourselves as Gulf people?” By pushing herself beyond the boundaries of what many in her society believed to be possible for a woman, Al Thani is helping to push her society forward as well.

Studied Discomfort

Gulf economies are growing at a breakneck pace, with relatively small populations and an even smaller cadre of qualified people who can maintain this evolution. As a result, the region’s leaders are often called upon to

step into roles for which they have not prepared and for which they do not necessarily feel qualified. In doing this, they further their own career and the growth of their country. Yet there are still too few leaders who are willing to take such risks.

Amina Al Rustamani, CEO of TECOM Business Parks, is not among the fainthearted. In 2001, she had completed her Ph.D. in electrical engineering and was doing academic research at George Washington University. She had recently taken a step outside academia on a project with TECOM Investments, where she saw how her knowledge of engineering could be put to practical application in relation to other functions such as operations, sales, marketing, and product development. When Al Rustamani heard of a UAE initiative to build a special economic zone called Internet City, which would attract technology companies from around the world, she sought and won a job as project engineer, working on the development's telecom infrastructure. She then became executive director of media for TECOM Investments, in which she oversaw the development of three cluster zones — Dubai Media City, Dubai Studio City, and the International Media Production Zone. When TECOM Investments spun off TECOM Business Parks, she became CEO of the latter — and now she oversees 11 such zones, focusing on information and communications technology, media, education, life sciences, clean technology, and manufacturing. These developments have drawn major multinational companies to invest in operations in Dubai, including BBC World News, Dell, ExxonMobil, Google, Hewlett-Packard, Moorfields Eye Hospital, NBC Universal, Oracle, Thomson Reuters, and Xerox.

“Changing your career and doing something

completely different is a very serious step, and it takes courage,” she says. “Starting as a project engineer was exciting for me, but other people thought I was crazy. Moving from that to real estate and cluster development was another major shift. It is a risk, and you have to work hard. But I like that.”

Raja Easa Al Gurg took a similar leap when she left a 14-year teaching career to join Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group, a family-owned conglomerate operating in the industrial, retail, consumer goods, and construction sectors. “My ambition had always been to study economics and politics,” she says. “But when I went to Kuwait University in the 1970s, they would only allow me to study English or Arabic.” She chose English, and began teaching after she received her degree, eventually becoming a school principal.

When her father, the chairman of Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group, asked if she would join the family business, she was hesitant. She had received many accolades for her work in education and was not certain she wanted to start from scratch. So she spent three summer months working in the company's warehouses, overseeing inventory and learning the business from the bottom up. At the end of the summer, she felt ready for a role running a steel mill. She is now the group's managing director, as well as president of the Dubai Business Women Council. The latter role has allowed her to have a substantial impact both within the region and in the world at large. In Dubai, she is an advocate for the importance of women's participation in the economy, as well as a role model for a new generation of women leaders. In her travels around the world, including visits to the U.S., Australia, Italy, Germany, and Japan, she promotes Dubai as an investment opportunity for

women and, in the process, shows the strong and active role that women can play in the Gulf economies.

Quiet Confidence

For women leaders, faith in their own ideas and abilities is essential in the face of frequent skepticism. In many organizations in the Gulf states, the presence of a woman in a senior position, particularly a woman from the region rather than an expatriate, is still rare enough for people to be taken aback. This reaction is exacerbated when women choose to cover their hair and wear an *abaya* (a long, loose robe). Several women commented that they refrain from saying anything important during the first five or 10 minutes of a meeting with a new contact, because they have found it generally takes that long for people to get acclimated, overcome their preconceptions about a woman in traditional dress, and begin truly listening to and recognizing the validity of these leaders' ideas and insights.

Skepticism of women's performance manifests itself in other ways as well. "Some people will try to avoid meeting with you because they don't trust that you can do anything for them," says H.E. Fatima Al Jaber, COO of Al Jaber Group and chairperson of the Abu Dhabi Businesswomen's Council, and formerly the assistant undersecretary for technical services at the Abu Dhabi Public Works Department. "But this doesn't have an impact on my commitment to delivery. I always perform to the fullest extent of my capabilities, using the depth of my knowledge and experience. I think it is counterproductive to focus on how others perceive my competence and aptitude."

This is a common theme: All of these women recognize that self-confidence is necessary to push past the

doubts of others and perform in a way that allows their results to speak for themselves. For Khawla Al-Kuraya, principal clinical scientist at the King Faisal Hospital and Research Center and director of the Research Center for Children's Cancer, the belief that she could achieve her dreams extends back as far as her adolescence: When she was 16, her parents told her it was time to get married, and she had her first child at 17. She was adamant, however, about attending medical school, and did so on scholarship at King Saud University while raising three more children. She went on to the pathology residency program at Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, D.C., then completed a fellowship in molecular diagnostics at the National Cancer Institute in the U.S. before returning to Saudi Arabia. "I didn't want anybody in the residency program to feel any different about me because I come from this part of the world or because I was a mom with four children," she says. "I would go to the hospital very early and leave very late to prove to all my attending physicians that I could do it." Her confidence in herself, she noted, led others to feel the same. "I think for a lot of women in the region, the biggest obstacle is themselves. Women need to believe that the role they play is important."

Creating the Right Environment

Even with these personal traits to draw on, women need to work in an environment that does not burden them with legal, social, and cultural constraints. As governments and companies in the GCC recognize the benefits of having more female leaders, they will need to explore and change the factors that keep so many women out of the workforce and thus out of the leadership pipeline.

In the U.S. and Europe, similar concerns have led

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to a variety of measures to move women into leadership positions. In 2003, the Norwegian parliament decreed that at least 40 percent of all corporate board seats in the country would have to be held by women by 2008; France now has a similar law in place, and other European countries are also considering such measures.

Of course, critics of such initiatives to push women forward have argued that the impact of qualified women will be tainted by the suspicion that they have been put in place only to meet diversity requirements, and that the better approach is to simply remove the obstacles that stand in women’s way. Some researchers, such as Sylvia Ann Hewlett (whose consulting firm, Sylvia Ann Hewlett Associates LLC, has an exclusive alliance with Booz & Company, *s+b*’s publisher), have set out to find the root causes of constraints on female leadership, such as lack of senior sponsorship, career paths that do not take into account women’s need for flexibility, and ineffective recruiting practices.

Women leaders in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries come down on both sides of this debate. “I think establishing quotas might backfire if women are placed in positions without the necessary knowledge or background,” says Al Thani. “I would rather make sure the ground is level for everyone.”

Others feel that quotas or other measures, such as incentives to hire women, are critical in countries where women still face constraints. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, strict gender segregation laws make hiring women a more demanding endeavor. For example, there are costs involved in the logistics of segregation: the construction of separate entrances and parallel workspaces and the installation of closed-circuit TV equipment so that men and women can work together without being

in the same room. As a result, it is easier for companies to simply maintain the status quo of all-male offices if governments do not give them incentives to do otherwise. “In the end, corporations want the easiest way,” says Muna AbuSulayman, secretary general of the Al-waleed Bin Talal Foundation, a philanthropic organization focusing on women’s empowerment, poverty alleviation, disaster relief, and East/West dialogue. “Since companies have to cater to these rules, the government has to create incentive systems.”

For Haifa Jamal AlLail, president of Effat University (a women’s university in Jeddah), quotas may be one essential component of multifaceted change. “I think removing social obstacles comes first,” she says. “I know that will take time, but then we need the laws, policies, and procedures that will really integrate females into different business and government institutions. Because now, even the institutions that are supposed to be equally open to men and women are still in men’s hands, and they do not really allow women to play a part. We need a bylaw or a royal decree from the king to show that every board has to have women. We also need a quota for hiring females, similar to the Saudization quota [which requires that a certain percentage of employees in any company operating in Saudi Arabia be Saudi nationals]. This will encourage women and make sure they know that female leadership is possible.”

The Way Forward

Those interviewed for this article agreed without exception that certain improvements in the work and social environment would be critical to fostering women’s leadership in the region. “You have to have the right ecosystem in place, and then make sure that individuals

have the right tools for leadership,” says Al Rustamani. These measures address both parts of that imperative.

Entrepreneurship. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a relatively small role in the GCC: For instance, in the UAE, SMEs contribute just 30 percent of GDP, compared with 45 percent in the U.S. and 67 percent in the European Union. A number of interviewees commented on the need for GCC governments to tap into their nation’s history, specifically the tradition of trading, and encourage a spirit of entrepreneurship — especially among women. Al Gurg points out that the chance to start a small business can open doors for ambitious, educated young women who want to work but feel that the long hours required for a traditional corporate career path are at odds with their desire to be at home with their family. A 2007 survey of 110 women business owners in the UAE, conducted by Dubai Women’s College, Dubai Business Women Council, and Abu Dhabi Businesswomen’s Council, found that women are running successful businesses in personal services (such as hair salons and tailoring), business services (such as corporate event planning), and retail. The survey noted, however, that these women want greater access to capital, training in leadership and financial management, and opportunities for networking. Al Jaber explained that Abu Dhabi is now offering training for entrepreneurs through the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce, with some courses that are tailored to women’s needs, and that the Chamber is looking into financing options as well.

Work-life balance. This issue, pervasive worldwide, is especially challenging in the GCC — particularly because so few provisions are currently in place for flexible employment. “The American model of working nine to five and doing whatever you have to do to get ahead doesn’t work in a family-oriented culture where women may have four or five kids,” says AbuSulayman. “When companies insist on that model here, they have a lot of turnover. At the foundation, we’re doing an employment study now to find some alternatives — for example, short internships that allow women to stay active and keep their qualifications current so that they don’t have three- or four-year gaps in their resumes

due to childrearing.”

Al Qassimi agrees that flexible work policies are critical, noting that the UAE currently lacks regulations that allow for part-time work: “Part-time jobs have to be structured so that employees don’t lose out on benefits or opportunities. Such jobs are also very beneficial to society, because you don’t lose an individual’s energy or contribution even if he or she can’t work full time.” Governments and companies need to collaborate on the best way to put such measures in place.

Education. In the past few decades, GCC women have made enormous strides in their access to education. In the UAE and Saudi Arabia, 70 percent and 60 percent, respectively, of university students are women; GCC governments regularly sponsor women who want to study abroad and bring new talents and skills back to their burgeoning economies. The challenge now is to make sure that women are pursuing educational paths that will lead to employment. For instance, education itself is still the most popular course of study for women in many GCC universities, to the point where the market is now saturated. Graduates whose degrees don’t meet the needs of the labor market need ongoing education and training, and universities and the private sector must work together to make sure that students currently completing their education are better prepared.

Mentorship. The fact that there are currently women in positions of power throughout the GCC is an enormous source of inspiration to young women. “We were the bridge that they walk on today,” says Al Qassimi. But it is not enough for young women to admire their role models from afar. “Formal mentoring programs are a must,” says Jamal Allail. “Professional development doesn’t really come from training. Mentorship addresses

the personal, social, technical, and professional aspects of work. It develops the whole person. Leaders should support the employees in their institutions, and leaders in different institutions should work together to create mentoring programs.”

Family support. All the interviewees agreed that encouragement from their families was integral to their success. Their parents encouraged nontraditional career paths; their husbands made the accommodations necessary for them to work long hours, to travel, and in many cases to be in the public eye; and their children expressed pride in these women’s accomplishments and a desire to emulate them. But in a culture that takes women’s responsibilities in the home very seriously, there is widespread concern over the fact that women’s careers could undermine their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Although this is always a very personal issue, governments can make a difference by sending a message — particularly in schools and through the media — that emphasizes the essential value of women’s contributions to society and the economy, reinforcing the fact that women can work and lead outside the home without undermining their role in the family.

A Critical Juncture

The GCC is a region in flux, and it is impossible to predict what will happen over the course of the next decade. But the changing role of women will clearly be a critical element of the region’s evolution. Although there is an urgent need to tap into their potential, there is an equally fervent desire to ensure that their widespread introduction into the workforce does not destabilize a culture that has already gone through a series of socio-economic shocks in recent decades. “We are understood

and appreciated by our societies, and we are developing our own path,” says Al Thani. “There can’t be a fast-forward; this has to come gradually. But we can make sure that the next generation doesn’t face the obstacles that we faced.”

It’s clear that there is an institutional shift under way in women’s economic participation, and that the leaders profiled here represent a vanguard of things to come rather than isolated outliers. Observers should not be deceived by the deliberate pace of this movement: As women in these countries gain the legal, social, and cultural support they deserve, they will change the face of the GCC’s development for decades to come. ✚

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