

Nov 04, 2016 by *Najla Al Awadhi*

Give Women a Bigger Stake in Building Gulf Economies ^[1]

I attended the closing session of the Gulf Cooperation Councils (GCC) Summit in Abu Dhabi this year. As all the delegates arrived and were seated I would estimate at least a total of 60 people, I could not help but observe, from all the government delegations present, we were 10 women in attendance as part of these delegations. A clear reminder of the gender gap in our region.

I'm not of the mind to discuss the gender gap as it pertains to women's rights, but I will discuss it as it pertains to human rights and the economic resilience of our economies. UNDP studies show us that lack of female participation is contributing to the depression of economic growth in our region. According to the UNDP, "the Lack of women's participation in the workforce costs the region billions of dollars every year. In countries such as ...Indonesia and Malaysia conservative estimates show that GDP would increase by up to 2-4 percent annually if women's employment rates were raised to 70 percent."

For our societies which are heavily dependent on oil and gas resources, not addressing the economic integration of half of society would be counter intuitive and hinders efforts towards sustainable economic development.

It is worth noting, at the Summit's meeting table, where heads of Member States and their key delegates are seated, all of which are men, there was one woman; Sheikha Hind bint Hamad Al Thani, daughter of Qatar's Ruler and also his Chief of Staff. While her presence there does not break any glass ceilings, it is certainly enlightening to see one of our GCC countries bringing to the helm a woman, which does send a message, that women are part of society, therefore they must be part of the decision making process, and that we are here; it is our god given right to be active in public life and in contributing towards building our societies. The issue of the gender gap did not make it to the GCC Summit agenda, it must in the future.

The first GCC Summit took place in 1981, where the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar met with the aim of ushering in an era of effective and sustainable regional integration and development.

The GCC Charter states as its objectives, the integration of member states in all fields by "...formulating similar regulations in ... economy, finance, trade, customs, tourism, legislation, administration. Fostering scientific and technical progress in industry, mining, agriculture, water and animal resources, establishing scientific research centers,...and encouraging cooperation of the private sector."

Since its establishment the GCC has made substantial efforts to realize this unity and integration among its member states. This has been exhibited through unified fronts on foreign policy issues. In addition to cooperation in the areas of military, security, legislation,

media, and economy. Under these stated areas the GCC have launched various initiatives, most notable; common market, custom union, common currency, investment fund, study for peaceful nuclear energy program, railway linkage, electricity linkage among many other initiatives.

This year's summit emphasized a peaceful resolution to Iran's nuclear program and its occupation of UAE islands, a just Palestinian peace process, the clamping down on terrorism and its funding, a common security pact, importance of Iraq and Lebanon's stability through dialogue and non external interference. The Summit also sanctioned companies owned by GCC citizens the right to open branches across six-nation bloc and ensured they would receive equal treatment as local businesses.

13 million barrels a day is the oil output of the GCC combined, with over 50% of the world's proven crude reserves, and with some of the largest sovereign wealth funds in the world, this puts GCC in a unique place with endless possibilities for growth. However heavy reliability on oil wealth also make us seriously vulnerable to market fluctuations.

We have no time to sing praises to ourselves, we live in a highly globalized and competitive world, and there is much work to be done. The lens of objectivity and accountability should be how we view and assess our realities, with the aim of always providing, ethically, a better life for our people.

In our quest to always re-enforce the strength of the GCC we need to measure the actual effectiveness and impact of the stated GCC initiatives, as it is the right of GCC citizens to understand the success or challenges of these initiatives and to participate in the dialogue of moving forward.

Education, security, research and development, political participation, a vibrant civil society and human rights are also core to the sustainable development of GCC economies beyond the age of oil. We should not wait for oil to run out or to be come obsolete before we start this race towards development and *cohesive* strategic integration of GCC member states.
