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# EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND CAREER SUCCESS IN THE GCC: DOES GENDER MATTER?

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## ABSTRACT

Extensive literature on labor markets has supported the proposition that gender is one of the most common attributes that explains disparity in wages, benefits, promotion, and other organizational achievement indicators. According to several scholars, work organizations can be treated as arenas on which social conflicts between different groups of employees take place. Many acknowledge that women in the GCC area have made great strides in achieving near-equality when it comes to educational attainment. In fact, recent studies by the World Bank and other regional and international agencies have shown that women in a number of GCC countries now constitute a significant percentage of university graduates. The increase in the number of private universities in the Gulf has further allowed women to claim a larger share of the region's labor market. However, such successes may not have extended from the educational to the labor domain.

Much of the existing literature exploring barriers and facilitators to women's career advancement has focused on identifying the personal qualities and characteristics that are associated with career success. In this paper, we focus on educational attainment as the main predictor of career success. We argue that in the case of the GCC region, little research has looked at the different impacts of educational attainment on career advancement for men and women. This is especially disconcerting considering the monumental changes in the role of women as participants in educational and labor spheres in the region. We employ survey methodology to collect data on educational and career attainments in the GCC countries for both men and women, and discuss the implications of our analysis and results for higher education professionals and policy makers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Women in the Arab world face many cultural traditions that stand in their way to have an equal stake in modern society. The reproduction of these cultural traditions from one generation to the next has deterred women from seeking non-traditional education and professional careers. Despite recent political changes which give woman more rights as voters or political leaders such as; laws that allow women to run for parliament for example in Kuwait, only four women have succeeded. Furthermore, many religious groups use women to encourage voters not to elect women candidates. Progress for women needs to be understood within the political and security concerns that continue to hinder human development across the Arab world.

In history it has been common that families are patriarchal in nature, where the male is the main economic provider for the family, while the female is the emotional provider. In male dominated societies such as the Gulf, the man has been seen as the sole provider for his family, while the woman mainly stays at home to raise her children and perform tasks around the house such as cooking and cleaning. After the Industrial Revolution, the patriarchal nature of the family began to fade away

and cultures started accepting that women work outside their homes (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009). This has become especially true after the two World Wars.

The changing role that women took on began in the first half of the 1900's as the first and second World Wars started. A lot of young men in their productive age were lost in war, and there was a vacancy in the work world waiting to be filled by none other than western women. After World War II women progressed greatly in terms of working outside the home, and they began taking up more technical war jobs, such as flying airplanes and handling guns (Goldstein, 2001). After that, the percentage of western women that worked outside their homes increased greatly, but soon this sharp increase in involvement of women in the workplace shrank (Goldstein, 2001). However, this fluctuation in the percentage of working women greatly impacted human gender roles and introduced western women to the work place.

By the mid 1900's, women started gaining more and more rights in the workforce. In England, for instance, in 1970 the Equal Pay Acts made it illegal to discriminate in the wages of men and women. Women now earned as much as men did and thus their percentage in the workforce increased till it reached 46% by the beginning of the second millennium (Women's Bureau, 2007). However, women still experience sexism in the workplace. Research shows that women earn lower wages than men with an average of 80% of a man's wage (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007). This information may give rise to several questions. Did this situation form the idea that males are the sole providers of family? Are these statistics true because women, especially married women, still see their income as the "second income" in the house? Are women ready to bear their muscles and prove their strength in the workplace?

According to Susan Trentham and Laurie Larwood, it is suggested that discrimination in the work field happens due to the Rational Bias Theory. To further explain the concept behind this theory, a manager would discriminate between employees not because he/she wants to, but because this discriminative behavior is approved of or favored by other people in authority. In fact this theory proved to be true with managers or employers that may be completely against sexism in the workplace or any form of discrimination. This article concludes that the Rational Bias Theory is applicable in our daily lives. The authors conducted a research where the subjects were asked questions based on some hypotheses of the Rational Bias Theory. These questions showed that managers preferred their customers' opinions over theirs, and they expected women to be discriminated against more than men. On the other hand, when asked, the subjects clarified that they expected managers with higher status to be less biased towards men, and to show less conformity to the customers' beliefs. In summary, the results of the research showed that men and women both "accept that a norm of discrimination continues within the business world." (Trentham & Larwood, 1998).

This theory may especially apply to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region) where people were found to be already biased towards men and have conservative views on gender roles (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2003). This attitude would encourage egalitarian employers to shy away from the idea of employing, giving a raise to, or depending on a working woman. It would also give an excuse for the "financially comfortable" women in the oil rich countries to lose motivation and stay home instead of working towards the benefit of their society and country's economy (O'Donnell, 2009).

It has been claimed that in order for women to succeed they are expected to be better than men in the field pursued (Trentham & Larwood, 1998). This could also be a major cause for women's lack of participation in the field of work, which results in the low progress witnessed in the economical status of the MENA region, even after a major education reform (The World Bank, 2003). This is especially true in married women's cases. In a collectivist society like the MENA region, trying to excel in a job could prove to be a tough challenge for a married woman especially due to the region's traditional view on gender roles where the man is considered the main provider of the family and working women are restricted to "socially acceptable" jobs, such as teaching and medicine (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2003).

Another opinion on why women in the MENA region accept inferior treatment is that women have been so used to staying at home, most of them are now unable to leave their countries to search for a more advanced higher education degrees, even when they have the chance to do so, and thus, they are more willing to accept to be paid lower wages and hold less prestigious jobs than men (Reuters, 2008). The article where this opinion is stated speaks of Libyan women in particular; however, it is possible to apply it to most MENA and GCC countries due to the similarities in the Arab culture.

Research shows that education in the MENA region has come a long way since the mid 1900's regarding the accessibility to education, and the success in narrowing down the gender gap that was once present in their education systems. According to the World Bank, all the countries in the MENA region have succeeded in achieving full primary school enrollment, doubling

the enrolment for secondary schools, and increasing enrolment in higher education by five times. However, these countries have witnessed a much lower progress than the results expected from the education reform. This, the author claims, may be due to the fact that “MENA schools may be producing the wrong mix of competencies.” Middle Eastern and Gulf women are still not using their educations to earn their places in the work force and that causes an overall low progress in these countries’ economical development (The World Bank, 2003).

However, the progress in female education has not yet reached the higher levels of education. Research in Saudi Arabia shows that numbers of single women are increasing dramatically due to an increase in the number of years women spend in higher education. Men in the Gulf region still prefer that women do not have a Master’s or Doctoral degrees, as they prefer to have superior education to their wives. This may put Arab females at risk of not getting married because the higher educated she is, the harder it is for her to find an appropriate suitor (Hamdan, 2005) (Al-Sari, 2003).

An article titled “Sexism ‘Costs Arabs Economies Dear’” shows that the economies of the GCC countries are losing greatly due to the lack of participation of women in the working world. Mustapha Nabli, the World Bank’s Chief Economist for the region, says that the MENA region is not “reaping the returns of this investment in educating women.” This article also says that “men still fear losing their jobs if women join the workforce in greater numbers.”

The low percentage of women involvement in the GCC workforce could be due to the area’s capital intensive methods of production, which use a few number of workers and offer high salaries to highly professional men thus limiting the number of women needed in the market (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2003).

In Kuwait, the issue of sexism is at a similar stage, where a woman is expected to gain the approval of her father or husband in order to be able to work, travel, or continue further with Master’s or Doctorate’s degree, and the priority in the university education is usually given to the male in the family (Roudi-Fahimi & Moghadam, 2003). In addition to that, women who do work are expected to perform the jobs of a full-time housewife as well as a full- or part-time employee. This results in extra stress on the woman to choose between her family and career. Statistics from the World Bank Group, Gender Statistics show that women make up only 25% of Kuwait’s, 16% of Oman’s, 15% of Saudi Arabia’s, 14% of Qatar’s, and 13% UAE’s workforce, while the percentage of women in the American work world is 46% according to the Women’s Bureau, 2007.

Kuwaiti law no. 30 of 1964 dictates that women are not allowed to work before 7 am and after 8 pm. A recent amendment made to the law states that the only exceptions to this law are women working in the medical field and the two female ministers at that time, Ministers of Social Affairs and Work (Al-Fuzai, 2007; Kazak, 2007). This enforces the idea that most men in the Gulf region believe that their “duty” is to take care of women and their well-being; and that according to the traditional gender roles and society norm, women are unable to protect and care for themselves.

In the area of Arab women involvement in the political arena, we have not yet seen high percentages of women in politics in the GCC countries. The percentages of women in the parliaments in Bahrain, Kuwait, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are 10.9%, 1.5%, 0.7%, 0.0%, and 0.0% respectively. However, we have witnessed a great change in some of the GCC countries, even if the percentage of Arab women participants in politics in 2006 is still 8.6% according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s (IPU) website (IPU, 2006).

Kuwaiti women recently gained the right to vote and stand for elections, in May 2006. This had been a major jump in the political involvement of women. Not very long ago, before the 2006 Parliament elections, women had never taken part in any aspect of the parliament elections. When women gained their rights to vote and to run for elections, Islamists and conservative parties argued that this action was “anti-Islamic and against the traditions of Kuwaiti society” (BBC News, 2006) Many Islamists even tried to persuade female voters out of voting by making other women “encourage voters not to elect women” (Al Khalifa, 2007). As a result, and at the time of writing this paper, females headed only two ministries, Ministry of Housing and Ministry of Education and were nor represented in the parliament. This interesting fact makes one wonder whether the women that fought for the right to election are the same ones that took part in the voting process? If so, then why aren’t there a higher percentage of females represented in the parliament?

An attempt to clarify these aspects is explored in the article by Akande which, states that women themselves shy away from the presence of other women in political positions. This could be due to the fact that Arab women have not yet established a strong foundation in the work market, and thus have not yet proven their credibility and ability to take part in something as sensitive and important as politics. A second opinion says that women are still seen as inferior to men, especially in a fieldlike politics, due to gender roles (Akande, 2007).

In summary, the literature strongly supports an uneven access to resources and power, and unequal opportunities for success for men and women in the GCC area despite significant socioeconomic progress. Our goal in this paper is to focus on a specific aspect of disparity in the GCC area by investigating how educational attainment may not lead to the same career advancement opportunities for the two genders. In the next section, we explain our methodology for testing our main proposition that educational attainment creates more significant career opportunities for males than it does for females in the GCC area.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To test our proposition that academic achievement for females may not create value in organization as much as it does for males, we employ a survey methodology and collect data on educational attainment and career attainment for males and females in Kuwait. While we acknowledge that significant differences exist in education, work, and other factors between GCC countries, collecting data from the entire GCC region was beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, based on recent studies and reports, Kuwait is a country that has made a significant stride in bridging the gender gap in education and in the workplace (MENA Report, 2007). We limit our survey to working adults by eliminating respondents who indicated no work experience. Our descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 1.

Our survey includes questions pertaining to educational level by asking about the number of post high-school education years. This is in line with major studies that have used this method to assess educational attainment (e.g. U.S. Census Bureau studies). We look at various indicators of tenure and experience and collect data on the following variables: number of years in current job position, tenure in the organization, and number of years of overall work experience. Our survey also includes variables related to performance and job satisfaction. We look separately at two indicators associated with satisfaction with promotion and with financial rewards received.

As shown in Table 1, we collect data from 210 working adults including 104 males and 106 females. The average age of respondents is 32.32 years with about 9 years of overall work experience. The average number of years of work for current organization is 4.23 years, and the tenure in current position is 5.27 years.

**TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS**

	<b>ALL</b>	<b>MALES</b>	<b>FEMALES</b>
<b>Sample</b>	210	104	106
<b>Age</b>	32.32	32.08	32.55
<b>Years in current position</b>	4.23	3.37	5.06
<b>Tenure in current organization</b>	5.27	4.23	6.28
<b>Years of work experience</b>	9.12	8.95	9.29
<b>Organizational level</b>	2.10	2.15	2.06
<b>Educational level</b>	4.32	4.60	4.04
<b>Performance</b>	5.37	5.27	5.47
<b>Satisfaction</b>	5.09	5.01	5.17
<b>Financial reward (pay)</b>	4.80	4.66	4.94
<b>Satisfaction with promotion</b>	5.19	5.06	5.32

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

We use a t-test for equal sample sizes to test for differences in the means between the male and female respondents. The correlation table is included as Appendix 1, and values that are significant or nearing significance are shown in bold. The results show that the Gender variable is correlated with Performance in the organization, Years in current position, Tenure in the organization, and Educational attainment. The two-sample t-test we perform sheds more lights on these differences. With respect to performance, the means were 5.47 for females and 5.27 for males with a p-value of 0.09. While only nearing significance at 95% confidence intervals, it appears that females tended to report more competence and expertise with job-

related tasks. Females also tended to stay longer in the same job position ( $p=0.01$ ), and had longer tenures in the organization ( $p=0.01$ ). The results above show a greater tendency of job stability for females and job mobility for males whether within or between organizations. This is reinforced by the fact that there were no significant differences between males and females with regards to overall number of years of work experience ( $p=0.76$ ) or age ( $p=0.69$ ).

While at first the idea that promotional opportunities or financial rewards may be higher for males than females may not be supported, we undertake additional tests to further delve into the nature of interactions between gender, education, and workplace outcomes. We proceed to look in more details at the variable Level in Organization. Level in Organization refers to job rank and is categorized as follows: Entry-level, Middle-level, Top-level, and other. The descriptive statistics in this case are summarized in Table 2.

**TABLE 2. SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR JOB LEVEL IN ORGANIZATIONS \***

	ENTRY-LEVEL	MIDDLE-LEVEL	TOP-LEVEL	OTHER
<b>Males (n=104)</b>	22	55	15	11
<b>Females (n=106)</b>	48	37	8	10

\* Because of missing data, sum of respondents by level may not equal total sample size.

One key observation from Table 2 is that 21.15% of male respondents stated that they held entry-level positions; the number for females was 45.28%, more than twice as high. On the other end of the spectrum, 14.42% of males reported holding top-level positions in their organizations, while only 7.54% (about half) of the females reported holding such high-level positions in their organizations. About half the male respondents reported occupying middle-level positions while only a third of the females occupied such positions.

The results of the analysis along the occupational levels are intriguing. From the descriptive statistics in Table 1, it is clear that females spend longer time in their current job positions, had longer tenure in their organizations, and had slightly longer work experience. In addition, females had significantly higher educational attainment than males. However, this did not translate into more positions of power and prestige in organizations for females; the absolute majority of whom still held entry-level positions.

An important variable that may play a role in explaining some of the results of the workplace outcomes could be expectations (Rand Monograph Report, 1994). We believe that due to the region's long tradition of male-dominated work environment, females may exhibit lower expectations for career attainment, and may consequently be more accepting of less than equal opportunity for pay and career advancement. While anecdotal evidence supporting this postulation abound, we believe that only objective organizational records that pertain to biographical and work variables could shed more light on this issues.

Another possible variable that may affect our analysis and results is the fact that many of the women surveyed worked to complement the income that was secured by the male who is the main income earner (husband, father, brother, father-in-law, etc.). Consequently, while income generated by these working females was important for sustaining the family and for securing a better living for themselves and their families, the pressures for success, promotion, and higher pay may not be as high for females as it is for males (Villota, 2005).

Finally, we conduct our analysis under the basic assumption that higher organizational rewards are desired by all. In other words, more pay, higher job levels and power are equally sought after by both males and females. However, previous research has shown that males and females may place different value on instrumental and affective rewards in organizations (Mottaz, 1986). In general, the literature on gender and work-related preferences has shown that women tend to value stability, satisfaction, and relationships, while men tend to value promotion, power, and material rewards (Murray & Atkinson, 1981).

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our study's aim was to investigate whether educational attainment created value differently for males and females in the GCC countries. While some of the results were interesting, this study has a number of limitations. First, our sample size was too

small to detect some of the finer differences among the two groups. But most importantly, we did not cover more countries as this was beyond the scope of this study. Future research should include samples from other countries in the GCC area that have maximally different attainment records as far as gender equity is concerned (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Oman). Another limitation of this study is based on the self-reported nature of the survey methodology. We ask respondents questions pertaining to their perceived performance levels, satisfaction, and other work-related variables. We use previously-validated scales; however, response bias remains an issue in such studies. It would be of great value to complement survey data with archival data sources that may provide other objective measures of educational attainment and work-related instrumental and behavioral outcomes in organizations. We do realize though that this may be easier said than done in an area where archival data may not be available, reliable, or simply unlikely to be shared with researchers.

Finally, we conclude by arguing that the issue of gender equity in the educational and workplace setting is of critical importance for the development of the GCC area and the Arab World. Many of the studies and reports by various international organizations have pointed to the serious gender gap in the region. We call for more active and sustained research in this area by scholars in the region, and for the establishment of strong mechanisms whereby research is more fully integrated with policy-making in the region.

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### APPENDIX 1. CORRELATION TABLE

**C3 (Gender), C4 (Pay), C5 (Performance), C6 (Promotion), C7 (Satisfaction), C8 (Age), C9 (Years in current position), C10 (Tenure), C11 (Years of experience), C12 (Job Level), C13 (Education).**

	Gender	Pay	Perf	Promo	Sat	Age	YR1	TEN	YR3LVL1	
C4	0.093 0.182									
C5	<b>0.115</b> 0.096	<b>0.676</b> 0.000								
C6	0.102 0.139	<b>0.310</b> 0.000	<b>0.490</b> 0.000							
C7	0.086 0.215	<b>0.591</b> 0.000	<b>0.685</b> 0.000	<b>0.718</b> 0.000						
C8	0.028 0.691	<b>0.194</b> 0.005	<b>0.185</b> 0.007	-0.055 0.433	0.098 0.159					
C9	<b>0.178</b> 0.010	<b>0.134</b> 0.055	<b>0.116</b> 0.095	-0.064 0.357	0.001 0.983	<b>0.657</b> 0.000				
C10	<b>0.186</b> 0.007	<b>0.197</b> 0.004	<b>0.199</b> 0.004	-0.030 0.661	0.038 0.588	<b>0.700</b> 0.000	<b>0.766</b> 0.000			
C11	0.021 0.757	<b>0.183</b> 0.008	0.207 0.003	-0.003 0.960	0.088 0.204	<b>0.887</b> 0.000	<b>0.715</b> 0.000	<b>0.737</b> 0.000		
C12	-0.044 0.533	0.007 0.924	0.066 0.351	0.031 0.655	0.053 0.448	<b>0.324</b> 0.000	<b>0.327</b> 0.000	<b>0.263</b> 0.000	<b>0.395</b> 0.000	
C13	<b>-0.140</b> 0.045	-0.112 0.113	0.034 0.627	-0.002 0.975	0.075 0.283	<b>0.274</b> 0.000	-0.009 0.902	0.005 0.948	<b>0.188</b> 0.007	<b>0.148</b> 0.037