

IMAGES OF GENDER AMONG WESTERN AND EASTERN PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF BAHRAIN

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Abstract

The theme of gender is largely discussed in private and public arenas, since it concerns questions connected to the concept of sustainability. It involves political arguments and requests economic solutions, not only humanistic notions. It is also a complex argument to study, with many faces and perspectives, connected to religions and social-economic development of different areas. Today two main visions are facing each other, depending on South-North/Western and Eastern societies. Governmental and Inter-governmental organizations are launching programs and laws in order to gain equality and parity between both sexes in every condition of life, since assuring human rights is a pre-requisite of human development and development in general. In addition, achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is essential for achieving sustainable development, one of the post- 2015 sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Gender, women, equity, Int. Organizations, Bahrain.

1. INTRODUCTION

After quite seventy years from the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948), one of the most diffused conditions of inequality is that connected to genders differences, since they are diffused, politically or socio-economically, even in countries where all human rights are respected.

Questions of equality and inclusion, other than being political and economic issues, are essentially of geographical importance, since their distribution and modalities and perceptions are variable. A special kind of inequality is that related to the gender, which is unpredicted even at national and local levels, or even at a family level. The principal mean, along with the way of equality, is education, but this is uneven even in developed countries. In independent evaluations of Unesco Advisory Body in 2005 and 2010 respectively, gender imbalance emerged even as a possible bias in the World Heritage system (2015).

Parity is also a basic condition for peace.

The UN General Assembly, in its resolution 3010 (XXVII), proclaimed 1975 the International Women's Year, and the period 1976-1985 the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace.

At the Nairobi Conference in 1985, United Nations were establishing progress achieved and obstacles encountered at national, regional and international levels, to attain the goal and objectives of development, after the Decade for Women. A Report had been released in Nairobi in 1985 for starting future strategies, named “The Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women during the Period from 1986 to the Year 2000” (1985).

From 2000 until now, two big UN programs have started, the *MDGs* in 2000 and the *Post 2015- Agenda or Agenda 20-30* in 2015, but, near remarkable progresses, heart-breaking conditions remain even in the most developed countries (UN 2015, a & b). The 17 points of the UN Agenda 20-30 include many proposals for parity. In particular, we remember the Goal 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”.

After the consensus obtained on the Nairobi summit, on the progress made in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, on the Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, and on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, with the objective of achieving equality, development and peace, one of the most important conferences was held in Beijing in 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women, which gave origin to the *Beijing Chart on Women*.

For example, In Italy, numerous females occupy extremely important positions, like the direction of CERN in Geneva, or one woman scientist has been on a space satellite for six months. Nevertheless, deaths of killed women and many killed by their husbands or relatives are registered quite every day. That occurs even if we are under the rules of EU which, through the Council of Europe, has proposed its own chart on women rights in 2014, named “Istanbul Convention”, precisely “Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence” composed by 81 articles (www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/home).

1.1 The inequality background

The inequality among people and men has a long history, but one fundamentally disparity is always persistent: the inequality between men and women.

Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), noted that access to good health care and reproductive rights remains elusive for many women and that not a single country had achieved full gender equality. "We cannot advance by leaving half of the population — our women and girls — behind," he said at UN General Assembly on 22 September 2014 (www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary).

The gender question is on the stage today, during the modern phenomenon of globalization and mass immigration, which impinge even on female issues. Females are charged with several tasks, the care of children and old parents, often they are the only ones who collect food, water and wood in poor countries, they are the last to reach a good job when they migrate, they usually have the inferior payment, even in the same conditions of men. Several agencies or institutions or international organizations are questioning about the ways to reach the parity in every field of activities or social interests.

All the instruments adopted by international institutions (UN, UN Women/UNICEF, OECD, EU) (www.un.org several years) act towards seven goals for women, in order to join:

- Environmental and energy sustainability;
- Quality for girls at secondary or higher levels of education, including learning outcomes;

- Women economic empowerment;
- End of violence against women and girls;
- Sexual and reproductive health and rights;
- Women leadership, voice and influence;
- Women peace and security.

2. THE WAY TOWARD PARITY

When the Decade for Women was launched, there was hope that accelerated economic growth sustained by growing international trade, financial flow and technological developments would allow an increased participation of women in the economic and social development of those countries. These hopes have been belied owing to the persistence and, in some cases, the aggravation of several economic crisis both in developed and in the developing countries, which have created important obstacles that endangers, until now, not only the pursuance of new programmes in support of women, but also the maintenance of those that were already under way.

In front of a general crisis, only the oil producers could have the financial possibilities of realizing a global female social inclusion, but only if the projects are not hindered by religious dogmas.

In several areas women are delayed by an excessive number of births, or by ethical prohibitions from religious organisms, both Christian and Muslim, or by other religions. The general result is that in most countries females remain “the poorest of the poor” (OECD, 2010).

The argument of healthy maternity has been inserted in the UN-MDGs and, at the end of 2014, an informing topic has been approved and included in the new goals of the Post 2015-Agenda.

The gender question becomes today an economic matter, since, involving females in the development process, means to recognize the women skills and education which could integrate the male contribution in works, policies and social questions.

Inequality is exacerbated by economic constraints, major stress and stress-related illnesses, work accidents, harassment and bullying (Woestman, 2012). Surely, Grotti, and Scherer (2016) suggest that important social stratifications are at work other than gender inequality.

2.1 Social arguments in a globalized world

The long economic crisis is creating a larger inequality and is impairing the gender levels adjusted during the years of economic boom. During crisis people are compelled to accept what doesn't matter job, independently on salary or work conditions, especially women (Vaughan - Whitehead, 2012, Woestman, 2012).

Today the role of women in society is enhanced by the prerequisite of sustainability, in facts both the UN-MDGs and the new Agenda 2030 are increasingly focusing on the benefits that governments and organizations must assure to women and children, starting from health, until furnishing with equal opportunities in education, jurisdiction, politics, work, social inclusion.

Even OECD promoted a process of justice with its contribution of the Post 2015 Agenda, both criticising the MDGs and preparing a new table of discussion for the UN-Agenda 2030.

Especially, scientifically important is the framework depicted in the preliminary proposal for the Post-2015 program, which reflects the OECD mission of a coherent approach to development, by designing the project *Better Policies for Better Lives* (2011, 2013, 2015), in addressing the shortcomings of the former MDGs, the outcomes of Rio+20, as well as new global challenges for 2030.

Practically, OECD prepared (2012) the Gender Indexes which outline a holistic calculation for development.

The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) measures gender inequalities in over 100 non- OECD countries, according to five dimensions: discrimination in the family, violence against women, women's access to resources and access to public spaces.

Individual well-being and progress are measured by OECD according to:

- Quality of life
- Health status
- Work and life balance
- Education and skills
- Social connections
- Civic engagement and governance
- Environmental quality
- Personal security
- Subjective well-being

OECD has proposed new solutions for the period 2015-2030 (Post 2015 Reflections, 2015). Along these proposals it has implemented a *New geography of growth*: “The shift in the world's economic centre of gravity away from OECD countries, towards emerging countries, has implications for the global balance of economic power. Developing and emerging economies have outperformed OECD growth since the start of the millennium, and account for a larger share of world GDP. The new engines of growth and the emergence of south-south linkages also create new opportunities for developing countries”, like the new economic climate encourages entrepreneurship among both men and women (Galvani, 2016).

The FAO document (2011) “*State of Food and Agriculture 2010-11 - Closing the gender gap in agriculture*” would generate significant gains for the agriculture sector and society. The document states that, if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5–4 percent.

“Women make significant contributions to the rural economy in all developing regions. Their roles differ across regions, yet they consistently have less access than men to the resources and opportunities they need to be more productive. Increasing women's access to land, livestock, education, financial services, extension, technology and rural employment would boost their productivity and generate gains in terms of agricultural production, food security, economic growth and social welfare”. (idem, p.3).

Today, not only in the agriculture, but in the services and even in the financial sectors there are new possibilities opened to women, if necessary skills are equally offered to both genders.

Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), noted that access to good health care and reproductive rights remained elusive for many women and that not a single country had achieved full gender equality. “We cannot advance by leaving half of the population — our women and girls — behind,” (www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/index.html) he said at UN General Assembly on 22 September 2014.

2.2 Larger perspectives

The Gender Equality Commission at the Council of Europe (Doc. 13733 of 17 March 2015) reiterates that “Equality between women and men is an integral part of human rights and a fundamental criterion of democracy”. Referring to the EU Recommendation 2053, in

Resolution 2012 (2014), the “Women’s rights and prospects for Euro-Mediterranean Co-operation”, the Parliamentary Assembly notes that “in the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, equality between men and women is developing unevenly, alongside democratic transition, with significant advances in certain countries and a situation of instability hampering progress in others”. The Council of Europe will help in strengthen co-operation with the countries of the region and contribute to the processes of democracy through laws, promoting the Istanbul Convention (CETS n. 210), which states: “Equality between women and men and actions to stop violence against women form an integral part of the Council of Europe’s co-operation priorities with the countries of the southern neighborhood. The Committee welcomes the exchanges and relations already established and urges continued co-operation to support and build on the progress already achieved in these countries” (Doc. 137333, 17 March 2015).

The Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination is focusing on three priorities:

- Preventing racism and intolerance
- Combating racism and intolerance, violence against women
- Fighting against discrimination on the ground of sexual orientation and gender identity.

The Assembly considers that “Co-operation by the Council of Europe with the Southern Mediterranean countries should also continue to assign a major role to gender equality components in the inter-parliamentary context” (Parliamentary Assembly Debate on 30 September 2014, Recommendation 2053).

The *Istanbul Convention* which entered into force on 1st August 2014, already ratified by 18 States parties, created the Gender Equality Commission at the Council of Europe. The Article 13 of the Convention plays on awareness-raising campaigns which should be designed in “close collaboration with national human rights institutions and equality bodies, civil society and non-governmental organizations, especially women’s organizations, and needs to be based on accurate data to ensure that they target their messages at the right audience” (AS/EGA (2015) 10, p. 3). Article 14 plays on non- stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships and the right to personal integrity.

3. THE FEMALE ROLE AND POSITION IN MIDDLE EAST NATIONS

While governments around the world are taking steps to advance gender equality, parity continues to remain a global challenge. Great differences in female gender’s results, success, career and respect appear among countries and especially between North and South, so women continue to have unequal access to opportunities in both their private and public-economic lives, including the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA). To address this challenge, the OECD introduced an *OECD Gender Initiative* in 2010 and adopted the *2013 Recommendation on Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship*. In addition, in 2014, the *OECD Global Forum on Women Leadership in Public Life* and the *OECD Report Women, Government and Policy Making in OECD Countries: Fostering Diversity for Inclusive Growth* called for the establishment of guidelines for gender equality in public life.

If differences exist among North and South, inequalities are even more differentiated in the internal division of these two geographical parts, especially in developing countries. The MENA region is in fact composed by very distinct parts, being African countries not similar to Middle East countries. MENA region includes 20 economies: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

However, one nation has made more progresses along the democratic process, and is resulting noticeable in human rights evolution: Bahrain.

3.1 The Bahrain

Bahrain is a small archipelago in the Persian Gulf, East of Saudi Arabia, to which it is connected with a 24 km bridge. It occupies a strategic location in the Persian Gulf, through which much of the Western world's petroleum must transit to reach Open Ocean, so it has an organized network of transports, having also a national air carrier.

It has the smallest population of the Gulf States, 1.343.000 (2014) inhabitants, with a density of 1.643 ab. Km², the third density rate in the world, comparable only to the City States. Urbanization rate exceeds 90%, concentrated on the far northern end of the island and around the capital Manama (www.cia.gov).

In 1916 it became a protectorate of the United Kingdom and remained until 1971, the date of Bahrain's definitive independence. It adopted a Constitution in 1973, and became a kingdom in 2002, abandoning the form of Emirate.

Now it has a mixed legal system of Islamic law, English common law, Egyptian civil, criminal, and commercial codes, customary law.

Bahrain has a high Human Development Index and was recognized by the World Bank as a high income economy; the GDP per capita has been estimated in 2016, in 50.000 US dollars. According to a January 2006 Report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Bahrain has the fastest growing economy in the Arab world. The lowest growth rate has been of 2,2%, during the worst years of the global crisis (www.cia.gov).

Bahrain is open to the external world, so, to demonstrate its Western policy has granted a naval base to the United States and has joined the United Nations. It has established bilateral relations with 190 countries worldwide; maintains a network of 25 embassies, 3 consulates and 4 permanent missions to the Arab League, United Nations and the European Union respectively, and hosts 36 embassies.

The Government has important relations with the United States, having provided a NATO military base, and implemented a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the US in August 2006, the first FTA between the US and a Gulf State. Bahrain is one of the founding members of the Gulf Cooperation Council; it adheres to the views of the Arab League on Middle East peace and Palestinian rights by supporting the two states solution.

It results as an advanced country in the horizon of Arabian oil producers. Oil comprises 86% of Bahraini budget revenues. Low oil prices have generated a budget deficit of at least a \$4 billion in 2015, or 13% of GDP, despite efforts to diversify its economy and to build communication and transport facilities for multinational firms with business in the Gulf.

The national GDP is divided into: agriculture: 0.3%, industry: 33.8%, services: 65.9% (2016 est.).

Renowned is the production of pearls considered the best in the world.

Other major economic activities are the production of aluminum, finance, and construction. Bahrain continues to seek new natural gas supplies as feedstock to support its expanding petrochemical and aluminum industries (www.cia.gov).

Bahrain has been the first post-oil economy in the Persian Gulf, investing, since late 20th century, in the banking and tourism sectors, hosting many financial institutions in Manama, becoming a fiscal paradise, characterized by the Bahrain World Trade Center and the Bahrain Financial Harbour, where the projected Murjan Tower, a skyscraper, 1022 meters high, with 200 floors, will be the tallest building in the world, over 193 meters (40 floors), more than the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, which is 829 m high on 160 floors.

Prince Nasser, of the Al Khalifa dynasty, is known for his opening to the modern styles, for his love for all the sports. He has set the car racing circuit of the Formula 1 with the Gulf Air Bahrain Grand Prix, and the MENA Motorcycle Rally, the Rugby festival, the polo and golf tournaments, the bike and horses races, and many other events.

3.2 The Bahrain social system

Bahrain has implemented a new jurisdictional system and is involved in promoting impartiality among different ethnic groups and religious *credo*, since more than half population is of foreign origin. Even if it is at the beginning of some progressive human rights evolution, it should be mentioned in the Middle-East panorama, for the role it is achieving in reducing the gender gap. Like other oil producers, Bahrain would look beyond the present economy, preparing for the day when energy needs will be satisfied using alternative sources. Urban, transport and buildings investments are today gigantic, like the perspectives on financial investments and bank credits.

Bahraini authorities face the long-term challenge of boosting Bahrain's regional competitiveness—especially regarding the industry, finance, and tourism—and reconciling revenue constraints with popular pressure to maintain generous state subsidies and a large public sector.

On November 11th, 2016, a delegation of Bahrain government came to Rome, Italy, in order to sign an agreement with the University La Sapienza. At the Park Hotel Marriott, where the signature ceremony was held, the representatives of Bahrain have organized an international conference and the Fair of Gulf State Cultural Center, aimed at building a social, political, cultural and economic cooperation strategy between Europe and the Gulf of Arabia.

The delegation of the small reign has exposed during both the events, the processes of political, social and cultural innovation undertaken by the government, to enhance the economic-political-social relations between East and West. At the exhibition, and during the conference, it has been strongly emphasized the peaceful coexistence that has been established in the country between the multifaced ethnic groups and different religions, from the Christian-Catholic and the Protestants, until the Buddhist *credo*, for demonstrating the government's firmness against violent extremisms. This, because the country wants to emphasize its role as a lighthouse of peace between West and East, favored by its symbolic position and archipelago profile, almost at the center of the Gulf. To this end, it has strengthened the judicial system and is pursuing an equality policy that seeks, first, the attainment of equality between men and women. For several decades, this policy has led to a greater number of women in educational institutions and women in government, passing through the high roots of the banking-financial system, the way initiated for the first time in 1970 by Princess Sabeeka. The result is that today in the Central Bank, 44% of the jobs are covered by women. This is a worldwide practice, because even in Japan, the female element seems more suitable for interpersonal contacts that are decisive in delicate transactions, such as investments.

The road to finance is the way to the future in oil countries that are witnessing, along with a reduction in reserves, the widespread introduction of new sources of energy. It is significant that one of the most modern and impressive buildings is powered by wind power. Enlargement to international finance takes place under the auspices of London - ties deriving from the English protectorate.

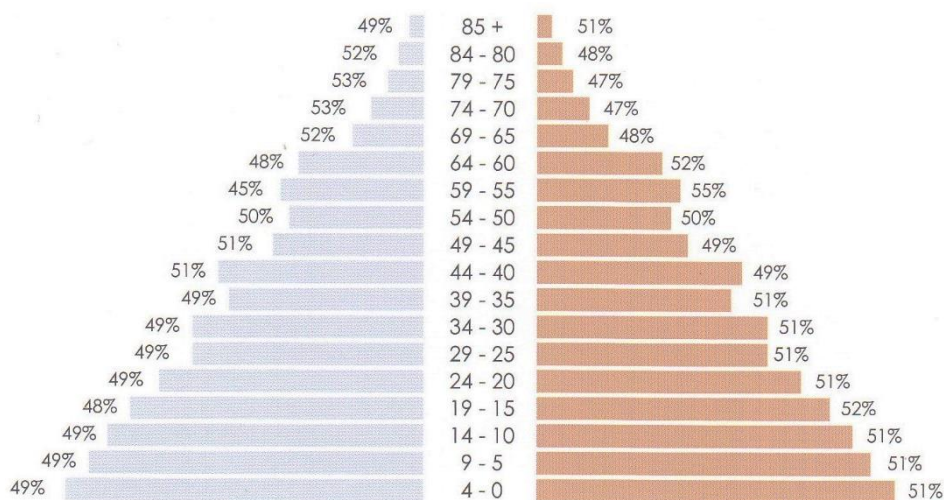
Finance is perhaps the most consistent way for the future of the Gulf States that have an excess of liquidity, which must be safeguarded, since it will only decrease in the future.

4. WOMEN ON THE STAGE

Bahrain is regarding a future based on services and for that, considers women the most suitable to social interaction, like it had also been experimented in Japan (Galvani, 2009).

Education is compulsory for children between the ages of 6 and 14, and free for Bahraini citizens in public schools, with free textbooks, but boys and girls are taught in separate schools.

Bahrain has a young population, distributed in a typical pyramid of developing countries, with an increased rate of 2,5%, but the high revenues could reveal great expectations for all the youth (Figure 1), since the unemployment rate is quite low, of 4%.



Source: Central informatics Organization (2015), Kingdom of Bahrain.

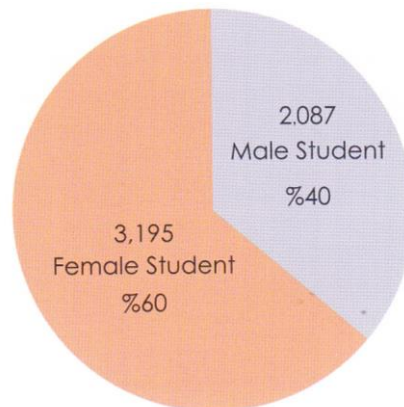
Figure 1. Population Pyramid for the Kingdom of Bahrain 2014 (Bahrain Nationals)

At the beginning of the 20th century, Qur'anic schools (*Kuttab*) were the only form of education in Bahrain, but after World War I, Bahrain became open to western influences, opening in 1919 modern public schools. The schools were restricted only to boys until 1928, when the first public school for girls was opened in Muharraq.

The Royal University for Women (RUW), established in 2005, was the first private, purpose-built, international University in Bahrain dedicated solely to educating women. Women's political rights in Bahrain increased when women were granted the right to vote and stand in national elections for the first time in the 2002 election. Six women were appointed to the Shura Council, which also includes representatives of the Kingdom's indigenous Jewish and Christian communities. The country's first female cabinet minister was appointed as Minister of Health in 2004. When Bahrain was elected to head the United Nations General Assembly in 2006, it appointed lawyer and women's rights activist from the royal family as President of the UN Assembly, only the third woman in history to head the world body. In 2008 one woman was appointed ambassador to the United States making her the first Jewish ambassador of any Arab country, while in 2011, a Christian woman was appointed ambassador to the UK (cia.gov).

Like the famous Mohammad Yunus- who has been the first in Muslim environment to help women and trusting them - the Bahraini policy is promoting the skills that - like it has been recently suggested by OECD - would be the key for future, the so-called “financial literacy”. Even if the educational breach is quite adjusted in developed countries, wide gaps remain everywhere in female and male educational choices, since mathematics and sciences remain an option predominantly chosen by boys, so Bahrain looks toward the future, avoiding the diffused habit of women increasingly becoming everywhere NEETs (Not in Education, Employment,

or Training) because of the rapid technological advances. In fact, the educational situation in Bahrain is satisfactory for girls, as we can see in Figure 2.

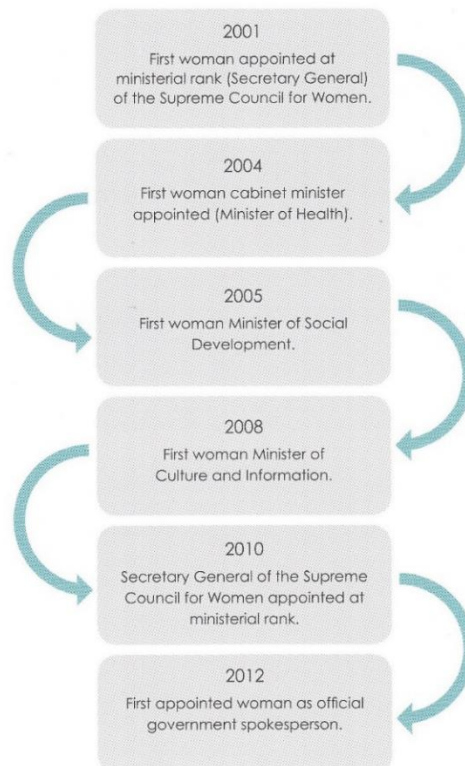


Source: Ministry of Education (2015). Kingdom of Bahrain.

Figure 2. Numeric and percentile distribution of students graduates from public and private institutions of higher education in Bahrain (2012-2013).

4.1 Women at high positions

The Economic Development Board will integrate women’s needs into the future policies. Updated statistics are foreseen in order to document the Bahraini women in the field of entrepreneurship in financing and insurance. The new real direction toward gender justness has been started in 2000 by a royal princess, and entered into practices in 2001, so that, today, women have a legal framework of roles, positions, and rights.



Source: Supreme Council of Women (SCW) Secretariat - Manama, 2015.

Figure 3. Women in Decision Making

Rules regarding female attire are generally relaxed compared to regional neighbors, and Western clothing is common in the country.

The Governmental General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Women (SCW) has implemented plans and practices in accordance with the bank and financial sector to ensure equal opportunities for women and to enable them to reach high positions. The women integration in the sector started in the 1970s, following the establishment of the Bahrain Monetary Agency (BMA), so the women staff represents today about 44% of the Central Bank of Bahrain (CBB) force, and cadres represent about 33% of the National Bank workforce, including high administrative posts.

Among several initiatives, we note the: *Implementation of a training program for women entrepreneurs in the Women Development Center* (Ryadat) and the creation of the *Supreme Council for Women in Investment Education*. The Bank of Bahrain and Kuwait is activating a *Women Empowerment Committee* in preparing a second row of leaders. A great role is played by multinational banks headquartered in London or in the US, suggesting new steps in changing towards modernity.

Interesting is the study conducted by the Gulf International Bank (GIB) in valuing the challenges which women are facing in accessing leadership positions. The Bahraini Islamic Bank is chaired by a special woman, a royal highness.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The most favored countries, that means today, the countries with oil revenues, could become a model of development and modernization for other less fortunate regions, especially in marginal areas, which don't have the means to implement studies, plans and programs, with the hope that the world will advance in peace, parity and wellbeing. The process could and must change through education and equity among citizens, but especially assuring rights parity for women, since they are the engine of development, thanks to the care of children who are the actors of tomorrow.

UNESCO also recognizes that culture is the essential driver for development and social inclusion (2016).

This, otherwise, also requires a better education for women, who generally are less involved in the formal educational process, or they follow the minor subject of studies, and with difficulties, they follow scientific laboratories. It is demonstrated by OECD that a scientific educational background will assure a general amelioration of economic level of female's social conditions, other than assuring a major degree of dignity.

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