

GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Target: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education by 2015.

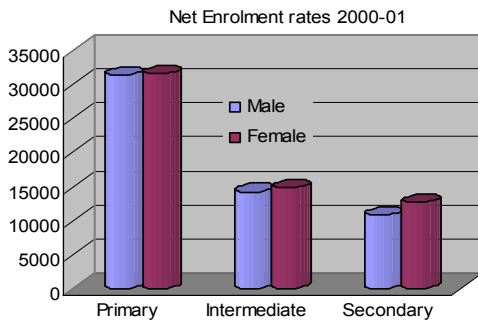
Performance Summary:
 Will development goal be reached?
Possibly – Probably – Unlikely – Lack of Data
 State of supportive environment:
Strong – Fair – Weak but improving - Weak

Status and Trends

Women in Education

Virtually all the MDG targets with regard to females in education have been reached and even surpassed; today females outnumber males in all but the earliest stages of Bahrain's educational system, including the university level, where the percentage of women students enrolled at the University of Bahrain, Arabian Gulf University, and the College of Health Sciences substantially surpasses that of men. According to 2000-01 statistics, the ratio of females to males (Bahraini only) was 1.01 in primary, 1.04 in intermediate and 1.13 in the secondary (Figure 1, using absolute numbers). In addition, in tertiary education, mainly at the University of Bahrain total enrolment in 2003 is above 19,000, with a female to male ratio of 1.6:1. Most recently recorded figures of graduates from the University of Bahrain indicate that women are graduating at a rate approaching twice that of men.

Figure (1)



Furthermore, while the dropout rate is relatively insignificant for both sexes, it is consistently lower for females at all levels according to 2000-01 statistics. For example, the dropout rate among females in primary education was 0.1 per cent and among males 0.3 per cent, at the intermediate level the rates were 0.4 and 0.5 per cent respectively, and in secondary education, the corresponding rates were 1.2 and 2.4.

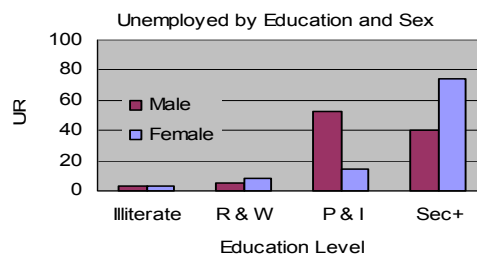
This achievement reflects Bahrain's longstanding commitment to education in general and to girls in particular. As part of its early educational strategy, Bahrain established its first girls' school, the Khadija AlKobra Girls School, in Muharraq in 1928. Since then, and particularly in recent years, great strides have been made in providing females with access to education at all levels.

On the other hand, the MDG survey indicates that for Bahrainis 15 years of age and above as much as 17.7 per cent of women is illiterate, as opposed to 7.6 per cent among men. While this represents a significant gender deficit, it should be noted that this disparity increases according to age, and among the younger generations the disproportion disappears. It can be assumed that with universal education this inequality will ultimately evaporate.

Women in the Workforce

The MDG Survey revealed that even though females outnumber males at the secondary and post-secondary educational levels, their share in the national workforce is limited. Women suffer from the general problem of unemployment in Bahrain but are unduly affected by this economic situation, enduring an unemployment rate almost double that of men. Although the ratio of women in the workplace continues to rise (from 7.1 per cent in 1991 to 25.8 per cent in 2001), and the varieties of occupations in which they are engaged is increasing, there is still substantial discrimination against employing women in both the public and private sectors of the economy.

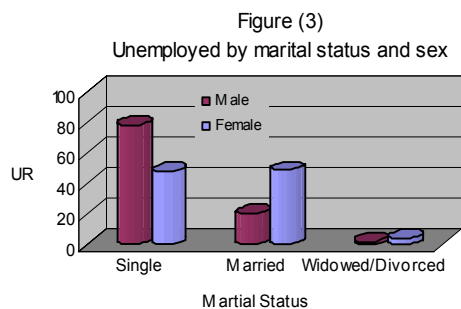
Figure (2)



Females outnumber males in all but earliest stages of Bahrain's educational system including the university level.

Yet, women's share in the national workforce is limited.

Female unemployment is at its highest among those who completed high school, 74.3 per cent (Figure 2), and among married women, 48.7 per cent (Figure 3), with very highest concentration in the age group 30-49, 38.5 per cent (Figure 4). This is partly due to the fact that women are often passed over for employment in favor of males, who may be less qualified, on the grounds that their roles as mothers and homemakers disqualify them.



Women who are employed tend to be grouped in “gender-appropriate” sectors such as teaching and health care where salaries and social prestige are relatively low. Once employed, their opportunities for promotion are limited, and their participation seldom rises above low or middle management levels. The current state of affairs may also be accounted for in part by the fact that unlike men, women in general have not been outspoken in voicing their complaints. This is beginning to change as women are demonstrating, along side men, to call for government action to improve the employment situation.

Women in the political arena

Bahrain’s commitment to the MDG of gender and women’s rights has been reinforced by the pledge contained in the National Action Charter that “all citizens are equal before the law in rights and duties. There is no discrimination on the basis of sex . . .” and “all citizens, males and females, have the right to take part in public affairs and to

enjoy political rights in the country, starting with the voting and candidacy rights in accordance with the law.” These rights of universal franchise were initially exercised in the May 2002 municipal elections and in October 2002 Parliament elections.

Currently, women are appointed to ministerial and sub-ministerial positions, act as ambassadors, under-secretaries, and, most recently, appointment to the presidency of the University of Bahrain has been a woman.

In addition, women are involved in organizations and societies, including the human rights and women’s rights organizations, and have applied to establish a Women’s League, an umbrella organization to represent women who are active participants in such societies. With continuing appointments to leadership and decision-making positions, women will increasingly be seen, it is hoped, as fully capable of filling elected roles as are their male counterparts.

Challenges to Achieving the Goal

The educational achievements of women have yet to be translated into greater economic participation. To achieve this, discrimination against job seeking women must be eliminated. Additionally, job opportunities for women need to be expanded in order to ameliorate the overall unemployment situation as well as to augment economic growth.

The main challenge is to change the traditional outlook on the role of women both in society and in the workforce. Marriage severely limits women’s involvement in the labor market, and women who work are still required to play a dual role, that of homemaker and child-bearer as well as breadwinner. Furthermore, traditional stereotypes about the ability of women to play an effective part in the workforce creates obstacles to their employment. Prevailing social views, arising from the stigma that women are emotional beings better suited to the home and family, cast doubts on female employment. Thus, women are expected to “sacrifice” their own happiness and fulfillment on behalf of their families.

Supportive Environment

In 2001 the Supreme Council for Women was established as an advisory body to assist the government in formulating gender related policies. The council is to propose public policy to the government on issues concerning women

Women’s call for government action to improve their status has strengthened and thus women are progressively appointed in leadership and decision-making positions.

The Supreme Council for Women, the advisory body in gender related policies advocates the improvement of the status of women in Bahrain.

and advocate amendments to existing legislation. The establishment of such a body corroborates the Kingdom's commitment to eliminate gender disparities in education, society and the economy.

Furthermore, women NGOs in Bahrain, representing 11 out of the approximately 300 NGOs, play a major role in supporting women and the acknowledgement of their rights. The government is committed to working closely with these NGOs especially on matters relating to the formulation of gender policies to integrate the contributions of all sectors of society.

The legislative structure in Bahrain, starting with the Constitution and the National Action Charter, as well as the recent ratification of the Convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), gives women equal access to public affairs, allows them voting rights, and assures protection against any type of discrimination in the economic and political fields.

Priorities for Development Assistance

The following are areas for development assistance:

- Education and awareness on gender issues, elimination of stereotypes and false perceptions and promotion of female entrepreneurship.
- Advocacy and support for gender mainstreaming in government policy formulation and implementation and in the decision making process.
- Monitoring progress towards gender mainstreaming through collection and analysis of periodic statistics.

Women's NGO's play a major role in supporting their rights.