



LEANING IN THE WIDENING ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE IN BAHRAIN

By Reena Abraham

Just last month, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (Unido), celebrating its 50th anniversary, recognised Bahrain and His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa with an award for their global role in delivering economic empowerment for youth and women through the Bahrain Model for Economic Empowerment.

His Royal Highness Crown Prince Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa, receiving the award on behalf of His Majesty spoke about the significance of the award and the global role His Majesty and the Kingdom of Bahrain have played in delivering economic empowerment for women. This award, he said, is representative of the diligent efforts and innovative initiatives that over many years have delivered better futures for the women and youth of Bahrain.

For a clearer understanding of what this means for women, let's take a look at the statistics. In Bahrain today, female workers constitute 53 per cent of the public sector workforce and 30 per cent of the private sector workforce. In ministries and government institutions, women currently occupy 47.8 per cent of the total workforce. Put this alongside the facts and it has to be admitted that Bahrain has made remarkable progress in implementing equal rights for women. The Constitution affirms the equality of men and women and guarantees access to job opportunities for all citizens and enjoyment of the right to participate in public affairs. Principles of justice and equal opportunity are realised through the adoption of laws and regulations and mainstreamed into national strategies.

The Supreme Council for Women established in 2001 as the authorized official body responsible for all women's affairs developed the National Strategy for the Advancement of the Bahraini Women, which aims to close the gender gap. Since 2010 when a national model for equal opportunities was put in place, 18 government ministries have opened equal opportunity units to ensure the integration of women's needs in development as part of the National Plan for the Advancement of Bahraini Women.

Bahraini women in 2016 hold leading positions as ministers, ambassadors, university chancellor, directors and in senior executive and management positions. With an increasingly visible place in the labour market, they have entered new sectors and positions previously monopolized by men. The State has taken care to promote gender equality in all laws promulgated on the economy and labour market. Pioneering organisations, like Tamkeen through its labour fund, have enabled women entrepreneurs. Through grants and guidance, since its inception a decade ago Tamkeen alone has driven entrepreneurial development regardless of gender, investing over 800 million Bahraini dinars (US\$2 billion) to support 95,000 Bahrainis, with many of the beneficiaries being women.

Earlier this year, The Supreme Council for Women in Bahrain and UN Women launched the HRH Princess Sabeeka Bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa Global Award for Women's Empowerment, an acknowledgement and recognition of the efforts and to highlight the successes achieved in the status of women at the national level. The award also represents the effort to create awareness and encourage best practices to enhance the status of women at the global level, a statement said. It aims also to ensure the commitment of countries, official agencies and organizations through their legislative, public and private executive authorities, civil society in addition to individuals to adopt non-discriminatory policies against women and to achieve justice in equal opportunities between women and men in various fields.



bizbahrain in an effort to understand what all this actually means decided to take a closer look at **SILAH GULF**, an organization that is increasingly known in Bahrain for its initiatives to support its women employees as much for its gender ratio balance.

A customer experience solutions provider, Silah was launched in 2009 as a Joint Venture in the Middle East region by Bahrain's eGovernment Authority and UK based Merchants (Dimension Data) with operations in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. As a gateway to a network of BPO, training, consulting and technology experiences operational centers expand from the GCC to South Africa with over 3,000 contact centre projects worldwide and a network of skilled people. In the GCC Silah, operate with a workforce of over 800 professionals supporting clients throughout the region in the Telecom, Banking, Government, Retail, FMCG and Travel industry.

At a round table with three members

of Silah Gulf's Leadership team, we discovered the career journey that has taken these women though long and at times challenging paths, has been remarkably inspiring and rewarding.

NADA AL GASSAB, General Manager for Telecommunication operations as well as managing the Kuwait operations, where she leads Contact Center, Technical Support, Customer Solution designs and Account management.

JO O'FLYNN, Chief Technology Officer, heads Silah's IT department. As the Chief Technology Officer of an IT enabled service company, Jo's role is vital for the seamless operations of the company through a robust technological backend support system, ensuring maximum client satisfaction.

SUAD ALKABIE, Silah's Chief of Talent, is responsible for the employee journey at Silah Gulf and oversees Human Resources, Quality, Learning and Development as well as the Silah Training Centre.

bizbahrain: Do you think things have changed dramatically for women at the workplace in the years you have been here.

Nada: Well, I started my career thirteen years ago. I think at the time when we started, Bahraini women were not that engaged into the work place market. However that has changed dramatically during the past years. I am very glad to say the perception of the community; the perception of even the businesses to working woman has changed. Women are taking a huge role today into developing the economy and developing the business.

Jo: I started my career twenty years ago in technology. When I started out it was a male domineered role. That has changed considerably now over the last few years. You now see more women executives reaching C levels, more strategic positions. I didn't know what I was expecting when I first came to Bahrain, but working in Bahrain has been absolutely amazing.

HEBA SAYED
Training and development Manager

"The company really supported me in my studies. My thesis for my MBA was in fact about Silah. I had so much encouragement. They believed in me and that made me believe in myself.

We, as women, have more determination and focus than anyone else. Who else can take care of the kids, and the home, work at a job and study and provide quality in all we do. We have this passion inside us for everything we do. For our family as well as for all the other things in our life. If you really love what you are doing you will find yourselves pushing and doing things that you never even knew you were capable of doing."

We've managed to achieve so many things as C level executives of Silah, as individuals, and as a team. I think many time we were striving and moving forward and I think were definitely growing in the right direction.

Suad: My experience is different. I have been in Bahrain as a working woman for more than 25 years. So the experience I had was challenging and the positions I have been offered were always at the management level. I think for me the empowerment for my career was right from day one. The opportunities are there as I feel the society and even the government here empower women in Bahrain. Even the opportunities we have in the last few years are tremendous, you see so many women in executive positions. Do you know the higher supreme of the woman, chaired by Shaikha Sabeeka. So this all gives more empowerment.

My experience has only been with our CEO Ricardo. He thinks very highly of women and he respects every idea we put on the table.

Nada: Yes it is a very caring environment. Even if there are any family issues, Ricardo is very caring and supportive.

Suad: We are all very disciplined. If we are at work, I don't even look at my mobile. So I think the three of us, we are very disciplined at work.

Jo: The trust we received from the management is so high and we appreciate that. One of the main initiatives of Silah was to drive empowerment with women.

Do you think women have an unfair advantage that allows them to benefit from their gender?

Nada: I think that's the misunderstanding about career women. Sometimes they do ask for extra special treatment, just because they are women but now, there's really nothing extra that we need except for our own rights, which is let's say, maternity leave after giving birth. But that's within the law, and it's respected by our government and fully respected by our company.

The misconceptions about working women are changing. In Silah, it is a different concept. We actually do receive high value for being women executives, managers and employees. We do receive a lot of compliments, because half of our executive team is made up of women. We're even considering adding more women to the team and hopefully one day we will chair it.

Suad: I think from the beginning when it happened it didn't mean to be bi-ratio, but when we examined the ratio of women in the company, we said: Ok we need to add more women and empower them.

NOORA BUCHEERI
Senior HR Officer

"We have a lot of women working here because the management is very supportive and helps us. Most Bahraini women like to work and wish to deliver their goals. We are lucky that we get a lot of support especially from the government.

Because of my experiences, I always tell younger girls, work hard, keep raising your goals."

ZAHRA HASSAN
Quality Assurance Officer

"I started working here as an agent with the Ministry of Housing for 3 years. I gained many soft skills and learned to deal with people before I moved to the Back office in another department.

Around six months ago I was selected as a Quality Assurance trainee. Hopefully next will be Quality Manager!

The atmosphere here changed me so much. Even when I go home the language I use, the way I conduct myself has changed. It's been a great learning experience."

Jo: I think more women are actually going into C level roles. Not just C level, but were having more in terms of the operational side, support team, back office. Even now, I see a difference with women in technology. As much as I love my guys downstairs, it's nice to have that equality of both women and men. Women can provide a lot around the creativity side. My guys are actually a lot more technical, so it gives that really good balance. It's definitely one of the initiatives were hoping to drive always. It's in the background of what we do.

Jo, as an expatriate woman working in Bahrain what has been your experience?

Jo: To be honest the perception that I had before I came over is completely different to how it actually is in real life. I really didn't think that at the level that I am that I would be treated the same. Bearing in mind that we are in the Middle East and there are a lot of reservations around what you can do as a woman.

But that was a different perception to the experience I actually had. Being here has been amazing, so I no longer feel that I have to work as hard to be seen and heard. I actually get respected in the level I am in since the day that I arrived in 2010. So no, I think people do have some misconceptions of the situation here about women.



From left Nada Al Gassab, Jo O'flynn, Suad Alkabile

Suad: I think Jo as a CTO, and some of these senior positions are actually male dominated in Bahrain. I remember when she (Jo) was one of the key speakers at a conference at the Royal University of Women, they were really surprised by her.

Jo: It's good to realize that hopefully one day you can be that mentor that young ladies want to imitate. We don't ever want to restrict those boundaries

for ladies. The world is our oyster and so long as we, like our male counterparts, put 110 percent effort in, just the same as everybody else, it shouldn't really matter whether you're female or male. Like Nada said earlier, I think we are respected very much, because of everything we achieved here at Silah. Having said that, we don't get any leeway or extra privileges because we are women.

Suad: Nada, you know she has two kids, but the effort she puts in, the time for the company, that's unbelievable. Sometimes, you think, how can she cope?

Jo: She's definitely Superwoman! I don't have any children, but I have two dogs and that's enough for me to go home to. We come in at 7 or 8 o'clock in the morning, sometimes we are here 12-16 hours a day and then to go home and look after a family... my hat's off to everybody that does that. It's a great accomplishment in itself.

What makes Silah different? Do you think it's a microcosm of Bahrain life here?

Jo: It's going to sound a bit like a cliché, but from my perspective, it's like a family here.

ZAINAB RASOOL
MIS Officer

"It has been great for me working here because I have been able to attend so many courses and professional meetings in Bahrain and Dubai. In the beginning it was difficult but then I got used to it.

The environment is so friendly and encouraging. My manager earlier was a woman and it was inspiring for me working with her.

I want to get more experience with the professional people working here and do better in my career and to improve myself."

Nada: The culture was built around our values. The most important one that I truly admire is respect. Each one of us respects the other person. We respect that as a woman you might have challenges. I also respect that as a male you might have certain challenges and we do support each other towards bridging those gaps. This can only be done, as Jo said, in a family kind of structure, in which we accept each other for what we are and we also do accept the faults of each person and think about how we can improve it and as well how to bridge it.

Jo: Now were around 850 employees. But it hasn't changed. That culture hasn't changed. When we first went live, when I was here in 2010, I think we had Viva, our first client. We went live with 20 people but we keep growing and growing each year, but we haven't lost those values, we haven't lost that closeness, in terms of the passion that we share for Silah, the vision, the integrity. I think that is what has kept us going all this time.

Do you feel that it is a competitive market out there and how difficult is it as women to cope with that?

Suad: I think this is out of the formula here. We never think this way. We think that this is work and we are deeply attached to Silah, in a way that

we need it to grow and succeed. So we consider ourselves part of this. We didn't feel like this is competition and we need to challenge and dominate men. No, we never think this way. We need Silah to grow and we need to support Silah and we need success for all of us.

Nada: I do agree with Suad. In Silah we might not have had such a challenge. I think we were the lucky ones, because we are working here. However, within the market place, because we go and have a talk with our friends, our families, our counterparts, we see the way it is, it's still very challenging for women to get an executive role or even to get a more senior executive role within Bahrain. Now that is something that we are all aspiring to change. This is part of our duty towards our community, it is part of our corporate responsibility to develop women and to develop employees and try to push them out into the market.

Do you agree that there are great opportunities out there and its up to the women to grab it?

Nada: I think it's the word you said: opportunity. Just give her the opportunity and she will amaze you! The misconception that we have is not allowing the women to get that opportunity because they think, oh she's going to take extra leave, she's going to stay home with the kids if they get sick, or she wants to go home early. All those kind of misconceptions that are there and I think that's what is hindering the development of women. Now give women the opportunity, similar to what

WASMIYA ALI
Quality Manager

"Silah is a place where they look and find talent and move you in the right direction. They encourage you to grow.

Here you see women in different roles, right from the managerial level to the leadership level. You need to know where your passion lies. Work on yourself and to improve yourself."

we did here and see how you can benefit from that.

Jo: Yeah, its important to just make sure that there are opportunities out there. Even when it comes down to the training and mentoring. For example, when we work with Tamkeen, there are a few courses that are available now in training, for instance to help empower women in IT. Let's promote those opportunities, lets promote training for women. Even if they do need to take time off, let's give them as much coaching and training and chances as possible. As long as you have the opportunity there and we all work together, I think we can get there.

Suad: That's part of it. Also, I think it needs patience. Before maybe women need to work very hard to prove themselves. But today the opportunity is there. Just take your time and put your heart and soul into it and in the end you will get the fruits of it.

Jo: It's having that proper roadmap, that journey mapped out for you. As you mentioned, from educational level, to then your employment, then when you reach employment level, to have someone to mentor you and make sure you are reaching your full success. And I think that's a major element.

If you could do something different when you look back, what would it be?

Suad: I think maybe I should give more time for my kids... because the years are going very fast and then you will see them grown up and you didn't give them that time.

Jo: It's making sure you have that work-life balance.

How do you think Bahrain ranks in the gender ratio and opportunities for women?

Nada: Within the Gulf, it's the best. It's number one and I know because we keep track of the numbers and I know the ratios. We are actually doing excellent in terms of women empowerment, women employment and

RENAN RASHWAN
Team Leader

"As a working woman and a mother it has been difficult at times but there has been support at home and support here at work. For every successful woman there is someone to support and that makes it easier.

Bahraini women have the power and passion and Silah empowers them. Never stop learning. Only from learning will you grow. To be successful you need to keep learning."

women managerial positions. I think Bahrain should be complimented on that.

What is your advice to young women starting out in their careers?

Jo: I would say, don't sit back and be afraid. Really go for your dreams. When I was doing my training initially in IT, I was a bit apprehensive. It was full of men and I didn't know how I would fit into that. All I can say is go for your dreams and think success. Don't ever be afraid to let go and run with it.

Nada: I definitely think woman should go ahead, as Joanne said and take the challenge. However, I'm mostly focused on all the women executives and managers out there today wherever they are. I think the duty falls on them actually,... they need to ensure that all the women out there get the strength and courage towards uplifting them to a managerial position. @

With inputs from Shereen Ahmed Rafea



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