

Massive investments in education has resulted in increased literacy rates and a growing, professionally-trained middle class. In the field of mass communications, satellite television, cellular telephones, and the internet have become omni-present, linking the region to the global media and communications world. Women, who have been constrained by a male-dominated conservative culture, are gradually, albeit slowly, gaining more rights, especially in some of the more progressive Gulf states of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

As in any society facing rapid change, the transition has not always been easy. In common with many developing countries, pre-modern, feudal and tribal influences continue to flourish behind the physical facade of modernity. This is not unexpected. Many of the contradictions between modernity and tradition continue to be at the source of societal stress. None the less, almost all national governments in the region have succeeded in providing a better life for their citizens, with more economic and personal opportunity for the vast majority.

Along with greater longevity and some of the best health care in the world, one of the prime areas of progress has been education. Throughout the Gulf, there has been an explosion in educational opportunities for average citizens. Adult literacy in Saudi Arabia has more than doubled during the last three decades, increasing from approximately one out of three literate adults (35.2%) in 1970, to more than three out of four (76.1%) in 1999.³ Improvements in female literacy, a key development indicator, are even more striking. In 1970, less than one out five (17.1%) adult women could read or write in Saudi Arabia. By 1999, the female literacy rate had more than trebled to three out five (65.9%).

In addition to the tremendous increases in literacy rates, the Gulf has witnessed the creation of an important network of universities and post-secondary education. All countries of the Gulf have invested heavily in sending students overseas to receive specialized training. Most students went to the United States, and the high degree of fluency in English of overseas graduates is an important contributing factor to the region's integration in the global economy and various areas of research.

Demographics and Societal Change - The Youth Bulge:

David Foot, the Canadian author of the best-seller Boom, Bust and Echo, states that "demographics explain about two-thirds of everything." In the context of the Gulf, one of the most important social and demographic factors is the emerging "youth boom." In contrast to Canada, with its aging population, an astonishingly high proportion of Gulf residents are young. Almost half (43%) of the Kuwait population are aged 18 or under, and 11% are under 5. This will have tremendous implications for the region in terms of demand for educational services, employment, and consumer services.