

Bahraini Nurses in Kingdom of Bahrain

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Abstract

Women in Bahrain have not historically been given equal rights to their male counterparts (Wang, Lindenfors, Sundström, Jansson, & Lindberg, 2012). While recent decades have seen an increase in the areas in which equality for females is being improved, such initiatives have not reached the level of ensuring the ability of women to contribute meaningfully to the Bahraini community outside of the home (Moghadam, 2016). This has created a situation in which women, even those with high levels of education, are unable to fully reach their potential to have meaningful impact on the country (Moghadam, Explaining divergent outcomes of the Arab Spring: The significance of gender and women's mobilizations, 2016).

Introduction

Where women have traditionally been able to pursue education and find meaningful employment in both healthcare and child care. This is particularly true in the area of nursing. Bahraini women have pursued educational opportunities in nursing, some as far as earning advanced degrees, and have been able to work up to management roles in the nursing community (Hatem, 2018). This has, however, generally been the extent of the ability of a woman to grow in her professional role. Leadership roles beyond day-to-day management have been out of reach of most nurses, and only one woman has successfully entered the area of politics in a role capable of influencing outcomes in the Kingdom (Rørbæk, 2016).

This limitation of women to achieve to their fullest potential has a dampening effect on women and girls in the Bahraini community (Paxton & Hughes, 2015). Before the initiative, women and girls in Bahrain could look forward to achieving little beyond management positions in their chosen field of interest. Because there has been little possibility for them to achieve positions of influence and power sufficient to effect political change, males continue to dominate the decision-making process that influences the lives of the female population, creating a recursive situation in which women cannot achieve positions of political influence and are therefore trapped in a cycle of being unable to change their own destinies or the destiny of the Kingdom's population as a whole (Moghadam, Women, work and family in the Arab region: Toward economic citizenship, 2015). This initiative seeks to change outcomes for women by providing education to the population as to the benefits of women in political positions of influence and to help the Kingdom appreciate the contributions women can make not only to nursing but to the entire Kingdom.

Strategic Approach

Changing the situation for women in Bahrain must start with an initiative designed to change the perceptions not only of the males in power but also of the women in the nursing community who have come to accept their limited professional roles (Eid, 2018). This initiative is designed to create a task force bringing together the most influential minds in the Kingdom to work together and change the ways in which women participate in policy creation, decision making, and the path of health care and child care for nurses in the Middle East. The work and the associated initiative will, over time, help to change the ways in which women's rights are regarded as well as the potential women and young girls are able to see in their own future.

The initiative, entitled Access for All, consists of the convening of a special task force in Bahrain designed to bring together influential individuals from a variety of organizations who can work together to shift the perception of educated women and their ability to participate fully in the political landscape of Bahrain. The initiative aims to convene a work group consisting of NHRA-BAHRAIN, the Ministry of Health, officials from nursing universities, and decision makers from the Bahrain Higher Education Council. The work will consist of collaborative discussion and decisions driven by the council to create change that will shift the futures of women and girls throughout the Kingdom.

The initiative is intended to produce policy changes that will be implemented by nursing universities in Bahrain. The schools, empowered by decisions made and backed by the council, will shift their courses of study to include additional classwork in nursing leadership, government, policy, and change management that can be used by female nurses as they seek to make change in their future professional lives (McClendon, Hackett, Potančoková, Stonawski, & Skirbekk, 2018). Nurses of the future who possess such formal education would then be qualified to participate in the political landscape of the Kingdom and would be able to contribute expertise alongside their male counterparts in deciding on how healthcare policies should be implemented, what changes should be made, and how to improve health and child care outcomes throughout Bahrain for even the poorest of the communities.

Political influence

Political influence is not something women have traditionally held in Bahrain (Moghadam, Empowering Women After the Arab Spring, 2016). This initiative will be one that takes time to implement and which requires an extensive vision and commitment to continue over a long period time in which the changes may be slow-moving. The current generation of nurses may not be able to fully participate in the political landscape but it is expected that by changing perceptions of the current generation, future generations of women in the Kingdom – as well as the entire population – will benefit and find greater equality (Paxton & Hughes, 2015). This initiative seeks to create a “bigger picture” understanding of the needs of all individuals living in Bahrain, both male and female, and to shape the future of health care and innovation in the Kingdom.

This initiative is creative and innovative in that, for the first time in history, it seeks to elevate the position of women in the Kingdom by providing access to education and positions of political influence that can assist in shaping a future of more equality. Traditionally, decisions have been made by male politicians and council members whose authority has impacted women without their input (Rørbæk, 2016). Access for All intends to place some of the decision making power with regard to the future of health care in Bahrain in the hands of the women who provide that care.

Historically, the Middle East has been an area in which males hold most of the power and make the decisions that impact the people over whom they govern (Moghadam, Explaining divergent outcomes of the Arab Spring: The significance of gender and women’s mobilizations, 2016). This has created a situation in which great minds, often belonging to women, have not had the opportunity to contribute in a meaningful way to innovation and advancement that could potentially improve conditions for every resident of the country (Hatem, 2018). Potential has been wasted simply because it belongs to a woman instead of a man. The very idea of allowing women to participate more fully, even if only in the area of health care, is innovative in itself.

By working through the educational system and relying on changes driven by the universities responsible for educating nurses, the initiative seeks to influence not only the current practicing nurses but also young girls and women seeking to enter the profession in the future (Eid, 2018). It allows those individuals to see promise in a future that permits them to have the skills and abilities to contribute to the political landscape and influence change in the nursing profession that can be directly linked to women and that can, in turn, continue to influence future nurses and generations of women (Al-Alawi, Husamaddin, Mejeran, & Madan, 2018). Foresight of this type has been absent in the consideration of women’s rights and equality in Bahrain and is thus innovative and creative simply in its construct.

Another innovative angle to this initiative is that it is driven by male influential figures already in place on councils and decision-making bodies that can swiftly implement the policies needed to include women in advanced educational and political opportunities. Most drivers for change for women’s rights in the past have been rooted in the women’s communities that desire the changes, making it difficult to make inroads into the male-dominated political structure (Moghadam, Women, work and family in the Arab region: Toward economic citizenship, 2015). This initiative uses the influence of the men already in positions to effect change and asks them to consider the ways in which more educated women can contribute their expertise and knowledge to making necessary innovation and change to the health care landscape in the Kingdom. The initiative, therefore, already has allies in positions of power that should help it to advance more swiftly from concept into reality. It addresses the problem of inequality not from the outside but from the inside and creates momentum that women who are disenfranchised to begin are unable to create to advance their positions in Bahrain.

Execution and Implementation

Access for All was implemented through a series of conversations, meetings, and presentations made to the individual groups being asked to participate in the collaboration as well as to the collective as a whole. These conversations eventually evolved into a group discussion in which the plan was presented, adjustments were made based on the input of the parties, and the committee came together to begin shaping policy that would be implemented first at the university level and then throughout the Kingdom.

The first steps involved gathering data on the status of women’s equality in the Kingdom and in the area of nursing as a profession. The data included the educational levels of nurses in health and child care and the positions those individuals with advanced degrees currently hold and those held by women of advanced education in the past. This data highlighted that women, even those with significant education, have not been provided opportunity to contribute to the Kingdom’s policy and innovation in a meaningful way (Moghadam, Women, work and family in the Arab region: Toward economic citizenship, 2015).

Next, meetings were held with each of the stakeholders to present the data and discuss the vision for inclusion of women in decision-making roles that could impact the future of health care and nursing in Bahrain. These presentations included both the history of women’s disenfranchisement and the vision for women to participate in political decision making in a meaningful way. Each of the stakeholder groups was given a presentation tailored to their own individual ability to influence outcomes.

Lastly, after each stakeholder group had been given the presentation, all were brought together to discuss what they had learned, provide feedback, and to make modifications to the plan to include university education as the first step in making change for nurses in Bahrain. After the group came together, a resolution was written with input from each group as to their commitment to the advancement of women in nursing and the decision making for health care and health initiatives in the Kingdom.

After the resolution was passed, the committee continued to meet on a monthly basis to discuss changes being made at the university level and how those changes were impacting the course of education for nurses graduating in the Kingdom. The university provided input and feedback as to how its students were receiving the changes and the enthusiasm young women were showing for participation in a field that promised the ability to be influential in their chosen profession. This, in turn, was given as feedback to the committee who continues to make changes to the vision and implementation of the initiative based on the ways in which the university is implementing the program and the ways women see themselves contributing to the political landscape in Bahrain both now and in the future.

As discussed above, there were a variety of stakeholders involved in the implementation of this initiative. These range from the individuals responsible for participating on the initiative's committees to politicians who will need to understand and implement the recommendations of the committee, to women and young girls who will be impacted by the changes both in the short and long terms. Additionally, one could say that the entirety of the Kingdom of Bahrain is included in the stakeholder group as all individuals stand to gain from innovative changes to the health care system that improve the overall health of the Kingdom.

The most obvious stakeholders involved in implementation are the members of the committee who are responsible for collaborating and making the initiative possible. These stakeholders will contribute their time and expertise to creating a system of recommendations to be implemented at the university level to change the coursework necessary for women to become nurses. This, in turn, creates a new system of expertise that will be used in the political landscape of the future.

The universities and their female students are important stakeholders in the implementation of the initiative as they must implement new courses that women will be required to take to earn their degrees and participate in advanced leadership roles in nursing and health care (McClendon, Hackett, Potančoková, Stonawski, & Skirbekk, 2018). The changes must be of the type that can be accepted and implemented if they are to be successful.

All citizens of the Kingdom are stakeholders, as well. Everyone must understand and accept the shift of responsibility allowing women to more fully achieve equality and to participate in politics in a way they have previously not been allowed (Khamis & Mili, 2018). This means that every member of the Kingdom must begin to accept that women will be exercising knowledge and power and they must come to respect the ability of women to participate in ways similar to that of their male counterparts.

Resources used for the initiative include financial, technical, and human resources. These three types of resources were necessary to ensure the successful launch of the initiative and to spread the word to all stakeholders. The initiative required a great deal of research and presentation expertise, something that utilized great amounts of human resources and funding.

Financial backing for the initiative was the most difficult and most important element of the project to secure, because without financial resources there was no ability to produce data or presentations of sufficient quality to influence those who would be asked to consider making such drastic changes to the ways in which women are able to participate in the political decision-making process in the Kingdom. The financial resources for this initiative were raised through joint efforts with international human rights organizations and local organizations committed to improvements in quality of life for both women and the entirety of Bahrain. The money for production of presentations was gathered over a six-month period through contributions and commitments of organizations who seek to improve opportunity and equality for women around the world.

Once the financial backing for the original presentations was secured, the individuals responsible for educating stakeholders asked to sit on the committee commenced. The presentations were made and each of the groups committed to contributing both money and human resources to the advancement of the initiative. This meant the establishment of a core group of individuals working full-time on the implementation. Thus, offices and technical hardware/software were purchased to continue the work of the initiative.

The core group working on the initiative then collaborated with university personnel on the creation of coursework that would prepare women nurses for advanced leadership roles. This work is ongoing and continues to require significant dedication of human resources and financial support to ensure that texts for the courses are available, that the design of the coursework addresses the aims of the objective, and that students – present and future – know of the opportunities available to them and the purpose of those advances.

The success of the initiative appears to be significant; however, because of the long-term vision for the initiative, such success must be measured in small increments with the understanding that full equality for women is likely generations off and the participation of more women in political and leadership roles capable of influencing innovation and outcomes in the health care industry is going to be very limited in the short term. It is important to understand these elements and the need for continued support of the initiative for years to come.

Short term successes of the initiative were important in that they laid the ground work for future advances to be achieved by women nurses. Coursework for colleges and universities has been modified to allow future graduates to have the expertise and technical knowledge to lead their colleagues and to seek out ways to be innovative in the health care field. Current nurses were not given the opportunity to participate in such educational opportunities and therefore lack the expertise their successors will hold. This change to the educational system does not produce immediate changes in the political influence of current women but will stand to enable changes for years to come. Another short-term success of the initiative is the outlook of young girls with regard to their ability to participate fully in influential positions and to shape their own futures as well as those of the people they love. These changes will be realized over decades as young girls continue to enter the nursing profession and become leaders who will eventually assume political leadership roles and create policy that drives innovation. These future leaders will experience more equality in their lives than do current nurses as a result of this initiative.

The exact number of individuals who were reached directly and indirectly by this initiative cannot be estimated. All women in Bahrain were indirectly reached by the changes made to the perceptions of women's abilities and their fitness for leadership roles. Thousands of students were impacted directly through changes to educational programs that permit them to more fully exercise their expertise.

As part of the initiative, monitoring systems were put into place to ensure that the initiative was moving along as planned and that the university was taking a leadership role in changing outcomes for its female nursing graduates. These monitoring systems included regular meetings, updates provided to the council on a regular basis, and surveys conducted to evaluate the ways in which current nursing students perceive their ability to impact their chosen profession upon graduation.

Regular meetings of the committee of stakeholders are held to ensure that each continues to advance the cause of the initiative and that the participants remain committed to advancing equality for women in the Kingdom. These meetings involve updates on how often the committee members are able to meet with other outside agencies to spread the word of their work and the ways in which women are empowered.

Updates from the educational members of the council are another important element as they share the changes to the curriculum, the number of women enrolled in new coursework, and the success of those enrollees. This information is used to shape the future course of study and to inform the ways in which nursing leadership is changed. Monitoring of the success of female students is important to prove the efficacy of the educational program and the fitness of women to assume positions of influence in the future.

Lastly, the program is monitored through surveys of women students, both those engaged in nursing programs and those considering such futures, to ensure that they understand the changes taking place and are fully ready to participate in those initiatives. This initiative seeks to empower women who are willing to lead and ensures that data is gathered to support this willingness. Monitoring of the women who will be asked to assume leadership roles ensures that the initiative has reached those it is intended to reach.

Obstacles

The main obstacles to the initiative that were encountered and that continue to be encountered involve the entrenched beliefs of the Kingdom with regard to the roles of women and their ability to participate in decision making and innovation that will change health outcomes for all (Green & Witte, 2017). Because religious and cultural beliefs have long placed women in subservient roles and have relegated them to occupations that are service-oriented, it is difficult to change the outlook of some of the influential males who necessarily have to understand the need to include women and women's perspectives in the changes that will propel Bahrain forward into the future.

These obstacles have been slow to overcome but inroads have been made in that many of the male members of the stakeholder committee understand and support the changes necessary to include women in politics and leadership roles. These stakeholders realize that the potential of the Kingdom is being slowed by the failure to include the expertise of all in the decisions made to advance innovation and other human rights issues on a widespread scale. They understand that inclusion of women, who make up the vast majority of nurses, in decisions that directly impact the provision of care is a smart move and can advance changes that otherwise may take decades longer to enact.

While not all obstacles have been overcome, and while there still remains a dearth of women in political and other influential roles, the recognition of the long-term vision for this initiative means that even small victories in overcoming obstacles mean the initiative continues to be effective and that it will effect change in the long run. The changes necessary require not only policy shifts but mental model shifts that will require continued education and support from many areas, including politics, health care, and human rights advocacy groups (Moghadam, Empowering Women After the Arab Spring, 2016). These changes can and will overcome the current obstacles and may face additional obstacles along the way, but because the vision is sound and the purpose just, it is believed that the initiative will continue to see success.

Impact and Sustainability

The main outcomes resulting from this initiative were the changes to nursing education programs at the university level to include leadership courses and the shifts in mental models of those responsible for inclusion of women nurses in positions of political influence and power that can effect change over the short and long term. These main outcomes are expected to directly influence young girls and women in that they provide opportunities for future successes and to influence all- men and boys included – in that they provide a new perspective on gender equality and improved outcomes in terms of health care for the Kingdom.

Changes in the educational programs for nurses are the most immediate and observable changes coming out of the initiative. These changes include coursework that was previously not part of the scope of nursing education because women did not have a need to exercise leadership beyond the management level. Including changes at the university level to include the types of skills necessary to be effective leaders and policymakers ensures that women are provided the skills and abilities to effect change when the leadership roles are offered to them. These changes are immediate and while they have not yet produced a great increase in the number of women holding such positions, they have provided a pipeline through which more prepared women will emerge.

Changes for young girls and women in the Kingdom include recognition of increased gender equality and the potential to assume leadership roles beyond those previously available to women. There is now the possibility for young women to perceive themselves as leaders in nursing and to aspire to greater heights. This increases the outlook of women and their perspectives on their futures.

Men and boys, along with female residents of the Kingdom, are impacted by the shifting views of gender equality and the roles women assume. This change in attitude will take a great number of years to come to full fruition, but the changes are evident in that men now see nurses as educated professionals and not simply servants. As attitudes shift and men understand the ways in which women can contribute expertise, it is expected that they will begin turning to women as a source of knowledge and leadership for changing health outcomes for the entirety of Bahrain.

One human interest story from a beneficiary that can be shared is that of a young girl looking toward her future and considering whether or not to enter a profession. She had previously considered teaching, but was reconsidering entering the nursing profession because she had heard that women could hold positions of influence in nursing. This young woman intended to pursue a path that allowed her to fully utilize her knowledge and skills because she cares to do so for her community. She is therefore likely to choose nursing over teaching as a result. The ability of this initiative to be sustainable and transferrable to other countries and even to other industries inside of Bahrain is uncertain due to the long-term vision and necessity to influence change in a fashion that sees slow returns. While the initiative is one that is gaining momentum, it may not be possible to accurately say that it is sustainable if individuals lose interest in making such change due to the desire to see rapid results and women installed immediately in leadership positions. Likewise, transferring the initiative outside of Bahrain or to industries other than healthcare may not be immediately possible for the same reasons. However, because the vision of equality is just and the global community is pressing for gender equality, it is likely that this initiative or one very similar to it will continue into the future (Green & Witte, 2017).

This initiative will see changes in the ability of women to participate in leadership roles without much added investment of resources due to the ways in which the committee has continued to finance change and the reality of the up-front investment in changes in education that do not require extensive additional investment. This means that, once attitudes and perceptions of women in leadership roles are accepted, the initiative will continue to advance itself, even if slowly. Therefore, the initiative or one like it is considered to be sustainable and community driven.

The ability to transfer this initiative to other industries in Bahrain is questionable due to the roles women are currently allowed to hold. Most are teachers or nurses, and allowing this initiative to give them leadership in these industries may be seen as more acceptable than allowing them to enter the workforce in other roles in large numbers (Eid, 2018). This is the same situation in many countries in the Middle East, where women hold traditional roles and are expected not to participate in others. The transferability of this initiative, then is questionable and it must be seen whether it is effective over the long-term in nursing before any expansion may be considered.

The lessons learned from this initiative are primarily those that involve an understanding of human nature and the difficulties involved in changing perspectives of individuals who have been taught to believe a certain division exists between men and women that is necessary to maintain culture and societal harmony. While these types of divisions are not actually necessary and are, in fact, harmful to the advancement of society, this initiative has proven that when people come together to make change, they will encounter roadblocks to that change that require mental shifts on the part of a large number of people. Those mental shifts are difficult to enact and even more difficult to sustain in the face of larger numbers of people who continue to see personal benefit from the oppression of women and specific groups.

Taking this project to scale would require a significantly larger amount of investment in terms of financial resources and the backing of more powerful and influential people than the simple small committee gathered for

purposes of this small launch. The type of change necessary to advance women's rights in Bahrain is a large-scale effort that must be backed by political figures and others with wide-ranging influence. Allowing change in small amounts in nursing may be acceptable to small segments of the country but for women across Bahrain to truly be allowed to participate in leadership, innovation, and change in the health care system would require backing from the highest powers in the land. This requires a great deal of money and maybe influence from outside the country that cannot be achieved on a small scale such as this. Therefore, to scale this initiative up beyond the simple one university involved would mean that tremendous amounts of time and money would need to be gathered and individuals with connections in governmental positions would need to see the benefit and want to have the changes enacted.

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