

AGENT OF CHANGE

Wael Itani ushers gender balance as part of transforming Bahrain's legacy egg farm

Wael Itani, CEO of General Poultry Company (GPC) is no stranger to diversity & gender balance in the workplace, having spent the last 28 years in blue chip companies across the Middle East, Africa and India. Wael has been the CEO of General Poultry Company (GPC) in Bahrain since 2019, modernizing the legacy organization with a robust transformation program.

He spoke to Leadership HQ magazine on the need for a strong organizational culture and how business success can only be achieved through gender balance, inclusivity, and diversity at the workplace.

General Poultry Company (GPC) is the leading producer of fresh table eggs in the Kingdom of Bahrain. It prides in its legacy of delivering fresh, nutritious quality eggs to consumers from its farms every day. Established in 1977, GPC is a wholly owned subsidiary of Mumtalakat Holding Company, Bahrain's sovereign wealth fund.

Wael's remit is the absolute modernization of General Poultry Company, and he takes on the mantle of being its harbinger of change with intent. One of the areas that required review and subsequent development in an overly male-dominated industry was to pave the way for gender balance. Bahrain boasts of a large pool of educated, talented and professional women and Wael saw no reason why they could not join the egg production industry.



Wael Itani, CEO General Poultry Company (GPC)

According to Wael “The first step towards gender balance was to begin with policy revamp and recruitment. For this purpose, GPC recruited a dynamic HR professional with a proven track record, Jalila Saeed Al Derazi as our HR Manager.” Jalila brings with her 18 solid years of experience to the table. Her areas of expertise are recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation and payroll, employee relations, regulatory compliance, and performance management.

Jalila is confident that GPC will become a role model in the country on being a gender-balanced organization. “My previous experience leads me to believe that the modern workforce of Bahraini women is no longer contemplating careers in the comfort zone of governmental jobs, and in banking and telecommunications. They are now more open to the idea of working in otherwise male-dominated industries. This is why I am building a robust bank of talented female profiles that enables GPC to populate several roles with women employees.”

One of the key recruitments has been that of GPC’s Senior Accountant, Ms. Nasreen Khamis, a British-certified chartered accountant. Wael feels that Nasreen is not only the right appointment to inculcate inclusivity within GPC but also the beginning of levelling an all-male workplace that the finance department of GPC was. As Bahrain has a vast talent pool of certified female accountants, he is optimistic that Nasreen will pave the way. Nasreen too is upbeat, “As opportunities in the government sector plateau for women, we Bahraini women are looking at expanding our opportunities in the private sector as well. I appreciate the initiative undertaken by GPC. This is a clear nod to the company’s progressive attitude towards including women.”

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Nasreen Khamis, General Poultry Company (GPC)

Wael adds “Gender balance is even more relevant in a country like Bahrain which has the world’s highest ratio with the female participation in the workforce at 49%, whereas the global median is 47%. My aim is to enable GPC achieve a 20% - 25% female workforce participation as compared to the private sector that has an average of 17% and GPC will lead the way by example.” Wael is confident that these numbers can be achieved in parallel to the overall expansion underway. He feels that professional openings with an equal opportunity for women based on competency, skill sets and knowledge across finance, IT, HR, Farms Safety & Security, marketing, sales, and administration.

Since Wael came on board and with the joining of Jalila, key HR policies have been revamped to make GPC an attractive choice of employer in the Kingdom of Bahrain. For a start, employee recognition and rewards program were initiated, ensuring the right motivation for enhanced performance. The development of women friendly HR policies like flexible working hours, WFH, maternity leave and assistance and leadership training are paving the way to usher in and include women professionals within GPC.

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The launch of JADEER in July 2021 is another milestone! An employee profiling program developed in conjunction with a Bahraini consultancy firm called QPlus, Jadeer is an ongoing program that seeks to profile individuals based on their personalities and skill set, using a series of aptitude and psychometric tests and then through a series of bespoke tailored programs to help employees develop their cognitive, leadership and management skills.

Today, GPC is undergoing a transformation to establish its presence, ably guided by Wael and the board of Directors. GPC has partnered with German company Big Dutchman for eight state-of-the-art farmhouses and MOBA from the Netherlands for the grading and packaging facility. Both are leading names in poultry and egg production and grading and packaging equipment.

Construction of the houses has been awarded to Bokhowa' Group and that of Packing & Grading unit to Iacovou Group. Construction of the farms is slated for completion in Nov 2021 with the new facilities commencing operations in the first quarter of 2022. The transformed GPC facilities will boast several advanced features such as automated grading and packaging technology, limited human intervention and live data streaming. With the expansion program, GPC is targeting a 100% increase in production of fresh eggs and a 40% market share within the next 3 years, up from a current share of 18%.

Wael is confident that the new structure, facilities, and policies will make GPC a role model in the private sector and attract the right talent including women. He believes women bring a strong sense of balance, competence, and knowledge to an organization. Given Bahrain's high literacy and education levels, women have the potential to help GPC achieve its organizational goals of being an efficient, agile & profitable organization. He is looking at more women joining the GPC workforce across different levels and functions within the company, including women from nearby villages so as to provide more local opportunities within the community on the blue-collar front.



Jalila Al Derazi, General Poultry Company (GPC)