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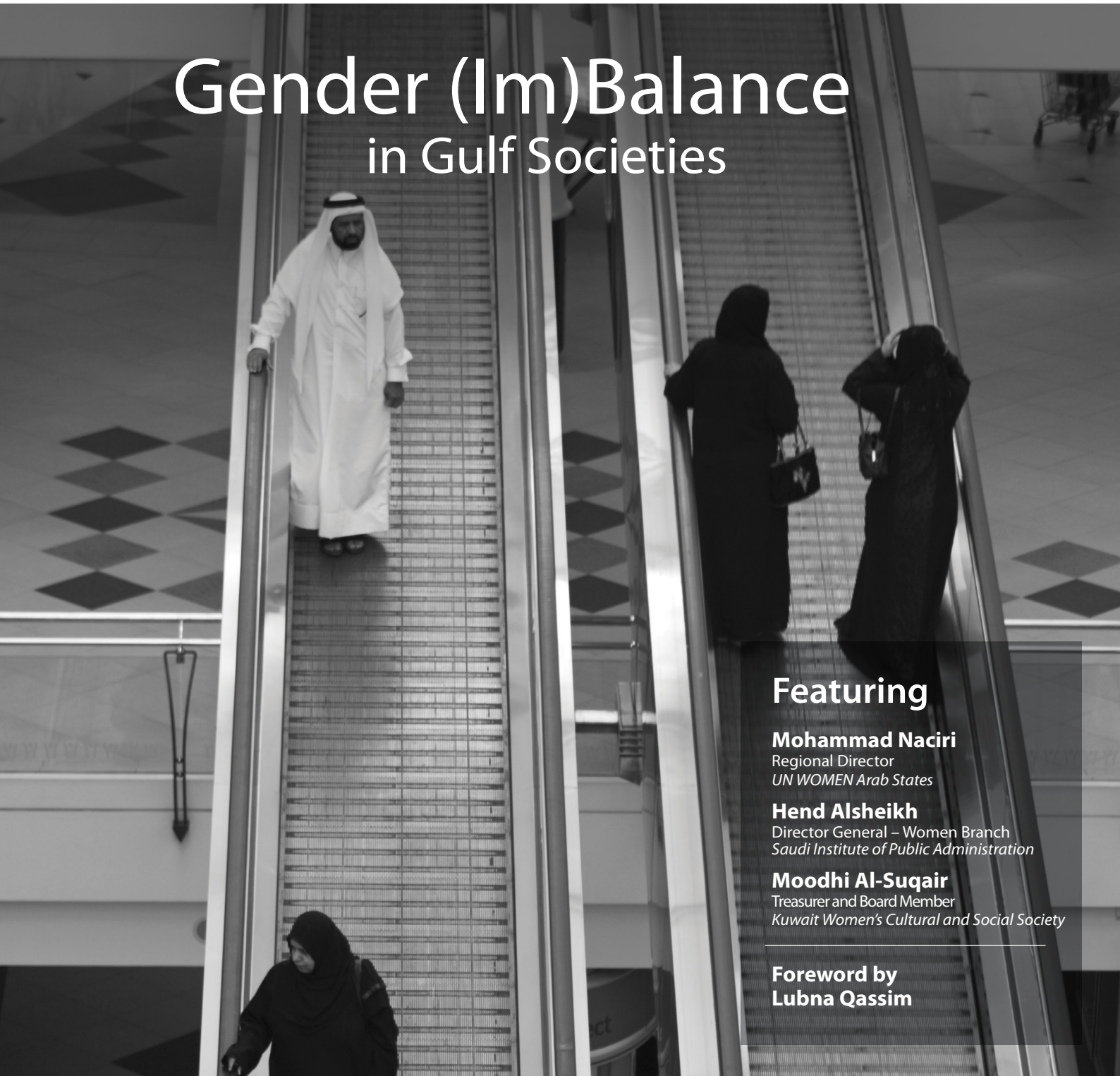

Gender (Im)Balance in Gulf Societies

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Foreword
by Lubna Qassim

I'm delighted that this edition of *Gulf Affairs* focuses on gender equality in the region and offers interesting insights on how the Gulf states can take actions that will empower women and reach gender parity.

My work in this area formally began in 2008 when the World Economic Forum invited me to become a member of their Gender Parity Group. It was a project that was dear to me, as my interest in this field began in earnest decades before when I qualified as a lawyer in 1999 in the United Arab Emirates. I saw first-hand the gender bias and unequal treatment women were subjected to—whether through deliberate actions or subconscious behavior. The legal profession is a very male dominated profession across both the East and West.

In the last ten years, I have seen phenomenal progress worldwide but also in particular in the Gulf region when it comes to more women entering the labor force. I've also seen many women reach senior roles in the private sector and secure leadership roles in politics. All of this has been a major gain for women's empowerment.

However, the most recent Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum doesn't share the same enthusiasm. It describes 2017 as a bad year in an otherwise good decade for women. The report concluded that the gender gap across health, education, politics, and the workplace actually widened for the first time since the group began tracking these indices in 2006. The reversal was mainly driven by declining gender equality in the workplace and political representation.

Today, a total of 68 percent of the world's gender gap has been closed. Yet clearly more needs to be done. And in the Gulf countries, and in particular the UAE, strong and positive progress has been made in the last year. Countries outside the region, including France and Canada, have also recently made huge strides toward gender parity. Iceland remains the world's most gender-equal country, while the United States sadly dropped four spots to reach no. 49 in the Global Gender Gap Index.

The World Economic Forum's report as well as a large body of research suggests that at the current rate of progress, the global gender gap will take 100 years to close. That's a 17-year drop compared to 2017's estimate of 83 years. Despite tremendous efforts, the global workplace gender gap more specifically will now take 217 years to close. That's too bad because a number of academic and economic studies continue to link gender parity to better economic performance, aside from the obvious human and social benefits of gender equality.

I strongly believe that as we move from the era of capitalism into the era of talentism, the competitiveness and prosperity of a company or a nation will be based primarily on how well people or groups adapt to changing times. At the core of this will be integrating women as an important societal force in a way that unleashes their full talent and potential for the benefit of all. Together we can create a new era that is more just, resilient, and inclusive of all.

Lubna Qassim is a global lawyer and an advocate for better corporate governance and diversity in the workplace. She is the founding chair of the Gulf Cooperation Council's chapter of the 30% Club, and was recently named as one of the 50 most influential females in the Arab World by Arabian Business *magazine.*

Gender (Im)Balance in Gulf Societies
Overview

by Amira Sonbol, Theme Editor

Perhaps the most significant commonality today that joins women of the Arabian Gulf together continues to be family. Central to the social foundations of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, it is safeguarded in the various constitutions that reflect traditional structures dearly held on to by societies that are undergoing rapid cultural and structural change. It is in the laws and the transformations of family structures, relations, and lived realities that gender inequality is most evident—and where resistance to it is most pronounced. Although GCC governments are moving toward raising the standard of living for their people, spreading education, and opening the job market to women, there are still obstacles yet to be bridged.

The constitutions of GCC countries include articles stating rights to citizenship and general statements of equality between men and women. At the same time, certain laws cancel out the freedoms that are implied by citizenship guarantees. For example, by basing the marital relationship on the woman's right to marital support in exchange for obedience and acceptance of patriarchy guarantees inequality between the sexes no matter what improvements and transformations take place. The same is true for other elements including defining the place of the mother as being in the home; insisting her prime responsibility is toward her children and her husband; and requiring that her obedience is first to her father, brothers, and other male guardians and then to her husband once she is married. These laws constrain Gulf women and establish boundaries in the parameters of their lives. While women are told what to do, men are told what not to do; while husbands can take a second wife at will, wives have little power to stop it; while wives are not allowed to keep their children from a first marriage without their husband's approval; men can keep their children at will. And so gender inequality exists at all levels of the marital relationship.

These unequal power relations between men and women, extended and strengthened by law, are also enforced by cultural traditions. Men are allowed both to marry outside their tribal group and nationality, but women are consistently expected to marry within the clan—often cousins or from tribes closely allied to their own. Marriage to non-nationals is rare and may require judicial consent. Gulf nationals generally support family and the traditions that guide it. But women increasingly find themselves torn between a system and values they believe in and want to hold on to at all costs, and the actual transformations, difficulties, and inconsistencies that challenge them on a daily basis.

The gender imbalance that women face are best illustrated by demographics. The literacy among women of the Gulf is the highest in the Arab world and among the highest in the world (reaching 97% in Qatar), but women still play a relatively small role in almost all high-level jobs. The only exceptions are the few female members of the political and business elite who work within their family businesses or in service of educational, social, and cultural sectors.

In addition, although marriage and raising a family are regarded as a woman's top priority, the number and rate of unmarried women is rising in all GCC countries. This is due to several factors, among them men who delay marriage, a lack of grooms considered of equal status to women, and the financial burdens of matrimony that largely fall on men—which is also pushing them to marry outsiders who are not as financially demanding. Significantly increasing numbers of women are also choosing to delay or shun marriage altogether, in large part to complete education, advance their careers, and ensure some sort of independence.

The extent of change in the GCC states can be readily seen in the infrastructure projects found in mega-urban centers across the region. What is being achieved is both impressive and sustainable. While inequalities still persist, there is an awareness among both society and policymakers that issues of class and gender must be tackled. The reform programs introduced in the Gulf region in the last few years took other parts of the world generations to realize. But the challenge continues to be how to preserve elements of family life and culture while addressing the inevitable shifts and changes that economic development brings. The efforts to provide women with advanced education and training, open avenues for cultural and artistic development, and welcome them into the job market are all bearing fruit today. How far this trend will go and what its impact will be on laws that dictate family relations has yet to be seen.

Dr. Amira Sonbol is a professor of history in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Qatar, specializing in the history of modern Egypt, Islamic history and law, women, gender and Islam. She is also the founding emeritus editor of HAWWA: Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World*, published by E.J. Brill. Previously, she was co-editor of* Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, a quarterly journal co-published with Selly Oak Colleges.*

II. Analysis

Two students study in a hallway at Education City at Northwestern University in Qatar on November 2, 2015.

The Challenges of Teaching Women's and Gender Studies in the Gulf Region

by Huda Alsahi

The women's studies and gender research scene in the Gulf states is still in its infancy. While the field has finally begun to gain some visibility, the recognition of women's and gender studies as an autonomous field of research and teaching has not been structurally integrated, nor institutionally anchored, in the majority of universities in the region.There is currently no single university in the Gulf countries that offers a stand-alone undergraduate level program in women's or gender studies (with the partial exception of the American University of Sharjah, which offers a minor in women's studies).[1] As for the graduate level, only two universities offer relevant degrees: Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar, which runs a Master of Arts in Women, Society, and Development;[2] and Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates, which has a Master of Arts degree in Muslim Women's Studies.[3] When it comes to just coursework, Qatar University's Department of International Affairs offers four undergraduate courses that tackle gender studies: Women and Islam, Gender in International Perspective, Women and Violence, and Gender in Law.[4]

Nonetheless, women's and gender studies face ongoing challenges. Institutional inertia in the field of higher education, particularly the red tape imposed on inserting any new discipline or additional curriculum, makes it difficult to strengthen women's and gender studies offerings in the region. Moreover, the preoccupation with tying education to the needs of labor market structures makes many disciplines within the social sciences—including women's and gender studies—vulnerable to market demands, as many assume that they have no tangible employment benefits.[5]

Gender studies' activist roots

In many countries across the world, elements of the educational systems have been specifically crafted to reinforce existing political and social norms. The Gulf states are no exception—the overall education policy has traditionally emphasized promoting loyalty to religious values, the head of the family, and authority in general. Rote learning, rather than encouraging critical debate, is promoted in the classroom setting.[6]

> Academic institutions in the Gulf region are a microcosm of the larger society, and they remain highly gendered institutions that are constantly restrained from embracing too much nonconformist thought.

But women's and gender studies, if responsive to its historical roots, cannot avoid being political. As a body of knowledge, the discipline seeks to emancipate women and deconstruct the main foundations of patriarchy. This is unsettling to many people, especially when it comes to applying a feminist critical lens to challenge certain beliefs and practices such as polygamy, unequal inheritance for women, compulsory veiling, and the male guardianship system, among other taboo issues.

The controversy that unfolded at Qatar University in November 2016 is one such illustration of the cultural challenges posed by teaching women's and gender studies in the Gulf region. The controversy began when Dr. Hatoon al-Fassi, a Saudi academic at Qatar University and a prominent commentator on women's issues in the Gulf region, was scheduled to debate a male professor from the university's Sharia College on the subject of women and Islam. The debate was to take place one month after al-Fassi was heavily criticized for endorsing an article written by two of her former students arguing that Qatar did not grant women their full rights yet.[7]

When news spread about al-Fassi's participation in the announced debate, some students launched a Twitter campaign demanding she be sacked. They also criticized Qatar University for giving al-Fassi a platform, as many thought her views were threatening to Islamic values and Qatar's conservative social fabric.[8] The president of Qatar University promptly cancelled the scheduled debate, posting a statement of its cancellation on Twitter.[9]

This was not the first incident involving al-Fassi. In the fall of 2014, students filed a complaint against her Women and Islam course which featured the controversial writings of the late Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi and Virginia Commonwealth University professor emeritus Amina Wadud.[10] Mernissi and Wadud's work demonstrate that what is popularly believed to be religiously ordained in Islam is not and in need of debunking. Both scholars also argue that gender inequality in the Middle East is rooted in the male-dominated culture, not in Islam per se.

The teaching methods in al-Fassi's Women and Islam course included close feminist readings of religious texts to challenge much of our received knowledge.[11] Specifically, students were encouraged to choose one Quranic verse that talks about women's rights in Islam, and then read various interpretations of that same verse ranging from the 9th century Muslim historian al-Tabari to the mid-20th century leading Islamic theorist Sayyid Qutb.[12] This comparison was aimed at making students critical of the ways in which Islamic ideals have been translated into our contemporary laws and practices, and that many patriarchal discourses were incorrectly attributed to Islam itself.

It's hardly surprising that in a socially conservative society with little tradition in the critical approach to education has al-Fassi attracted considerable controversy—being accused of criticizing the Quran and twisting it to favor women. Thus, in the aftermath of the November 2016 controversy, she was put under surveillance and the university's administration recorded her lectures to maintain close supervision. A

committee of mostly male scholars from the Sharia College also ended up reviewing and then revising the syllabus of her Women and Islam course. She was eventually barred from teaching the course altogether, and a male professor was assigned to take her place.[13]

Women's studies in male-dominated societies

One can't dismiss that academic institutions in the Gulf region are a microcosm of the larger society, and they remain highly gendered institutions that are constantly restrained from embracing too much nonconformist thought.[14] Gender norms are deeply entrenched, and efforts to promote feminist knowledge—as seen in the case of al-Fassi—are met with anything from implicit to active resistance at the individual, group, and/or institutional level.[15]

Most Gulf states have in recent years begun to focus more on women's issues. Yet the political and institutional focus has tended to be directed toward family-oriented policies rather than seeing women as independent legal subjects.[16] While public discourse celebrates female role models, there is little, if any, discussion of issues that make up a typical feminist agenda. The fact that feminism remains a controversial topic and is widely considered to threaten family cohesion does, more than any other factor, prevent women's and gender studies offerings in the Gulf states from finally breaking out of its nascent state. The region's universities would do better to take these dynamics into account and adopt best practices in teaching and research.

Huda Alsahi is a PhD candidate in Political Science at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences in Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence, Italy.

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A dancer tucks his Apple iphone next to his traditional Omani dagger during a cultural welcome ceremony outside the Sultan's Palace in Muscat on the second day of a Royal tour of Oman by Prince Charles, Prince of Wales and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall on November 5, 2016.

Virtual Identity Systems Should Better Support Gulf Nationals

by Sercan Şengün & D. Fox Harrell

The use of online information and communication technologies—such as social media—is especially pervasive in the Gulf states. The UAE is the world leader when it comes to internet usage (99%) and mobile social media access (88%), with the other Gulf states having usage rates that are nearly as high.[1] Qatar leads the region for time spent online with 45 hours per week—far above the 27 hours per week regional average.[2] Emiratis report spending 60 percent of their online time socializing with family members, and Saudis spend 50 percent of their online time in the same way. Emiratis also spend nearly 33 percent of their online time socializing with friends, as do the same rate of Qataris. One research study cites Qatar as the leading Gulf state when it comes to social media use in the Middle East and North Africa, followed by the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman.[3] But while Gulf nationals are among the world's most active internet and social media users, virtual identity systems do not adequately reflect their values and cultural norms.

For any user to interact on social media and other online platforms, they must construct virtual identities—creating social media profiles, selecting profile photos and user names, and building gaming avatars.

Developers can design systems that support the needs and values of diverse communities and subgroups—both regionally and globally.

These identities enable users to communicate, interact, and express their senses of self—including gender and ethnicity, which are self-representation categories that are highly effective in governing virtual identity construction and online behavior.[4] In fact, according to our research—which included 18 interviews with people from the Middle East as well as big data analysis from popular social media applications—the availability of suitable gender and ethnicity options are empirically linked to better user performance and engagement in virtual environments.[5]

Gendered considerations

Many observers—including researchers focusing on the Middle East—might assume that it would predominantly be female users who experience social constraints and tensions while constructing virtual identities. Yet our research shows that male users, particularly younger ones, also negotiate cultural and social limitations. For them, underscoring *khaleeji* identity through regional clothing, beard styles, and cultural imagery is an important consideration when constructing virtual identities. Using profile images with *thobes* and *ghutras*, adopting certain sitting and standing positions, and selecting headshots rather than candid poses reinforce cultural identity and becomes essential for formal connections with elder family members and colleagues. These tactics also help portray modesty—a valued personal trait. These kinds of hegemonically reinforced male representations that must be both formal and modest are seen as crucial for social objectives like business ownership, inter- and intra-family relations, and socio-political status.

But for younger users, there is also a demand for informal presentation among friends and family members of similar age groups. This informal self might involve clothing from outside the local milieu, more candid selfies, and an otherwise relaxed appearance. Many social media and gaming platforms typically fail to provide features for customizing self-representations and tailoring them for different user groups. It is therefore common for Gulf users to own multiple devices (mobile subscriptions are 127 percent of the Gulf region's population) that are logged into separate social media accounts geared toward certain types of connections—for example, an "official" device or account for elder family members and business connections, in addition to another more "anonymous" one for friends and informal connections.

While male users negotiate formality and informality, considerations of modesty and privacy are far more crucial to female users. This is due to the fact that a mix of cultural, social, and religious values have a strong impact on dictating personal appearance, public etiquette, interaction with strangers, and family life—all of which tie back to the regional experience of female identity. Three cultural considerations in particular have been described as having a bearing on privacy and modesty: *awrah*, the intimacy of one's body; *hurma*, the sacredness of certain spaces like homes and mosques; and *haq al-khososyah*, the local laws that protect *hurma*.[5] While these aspects might narrowly be interpreted as religious prescriptions, they are (like in most places in the world) deeply interwoven culturally. In recent times, they have been regulated varyingly by both state and interpersonal interactions, and not simply guided by religion alone.

To project a contemporary take on modesty, female users (and occasionally males) in the region avoid showing their faces in their profile photos. Thematic photos are often selected and can range from flowers, natural scenes, skylines of Middle Eastern cities, various animals, cars and SUVs, and close-ups where the person's identity cannot be readily determined. Additionally, users frequently choose silhouettes rather

than direct photos—an increasingly common trend for men who want to incorporate some relaxed representations within their formal accounts.

Yet the need for privacy and modesty, coupled with the tensions over formal versus informal presentation, creates issues for Gulf nationals of any gender when it comes to interacting with strangers online. Male users are subject to online bullying and racism,[6] especially when they emphasize their *khaleeji* identities through photos. Female users often feel the need to consolidate their online interactions in closed social groups—including WhatsApp chats and private Facebook groups. Membership to these groups is strictly moderated, and interactions with strangers are only done on a referral basis—such as a user inviting a close friend to the group.

The lack of diversity in virtual identities

For Gulf nationals, the lack of diverse and empowering *khaleeji* representations in virtual identity systems is a recurrent problem. While some Gulf nationals may believe that a degree of universality is an advantage, all virtual identity representations are culturally grounded (typically with North American and European norms, not "universal" ones).

Users who do not wish to put aside their own cultural backgrounds are viewed as disruptive. In video games or social media that utilize illustrative and cartoonish avatars, few have visual features derived from the diverse and rich array of local Gulf cultures and values. Even those systems that employ limited *khaleeji* representations typically fail to address the diversity within the region—including country-specific *ghutras*, *shaylas*, make-up styles, or beards. Nuanced representations of men and women are also flattened, with male images limited to hyper-masculine and even hostile constructs.[7]

At the language level, many major global platforms and gaming applications also still fail to support the Arabic alphabet—forcing people to type in Arabic using Latin letters. Although this hybrid form of Arabic writing (sometimes called *Arabizi*) may be seen as easier or "cooler" among young users, there is growing alarm and criticism over its effects on the Arabic language.

What system designers can do

Virtual representations of gender and cultural identities reveal a set of challenges, problems, and new phenomena for Gulf users. Yet developers can design systems that support the needs and values of diverse communities and subgroups—both regionally and globally. Much of the inadequacy of such systems could be overcome through consultation, cooperation, and guidance from the members of the relevant local cultures.

As cultural and technological production practices continue to spread transnationally, it is not unrealistic for industries to cater to diverse gender and ethnic communities. In the case of the Gulf region, the high penetration rate of people using applications, social media, video games, and other kinds of virtual environments would especially benefit if platforms and businesses catered to local tastes. Our research underscores the need for virtual systems that empower Middle Eastern users to participate in digital media and online communication in ways that support their own cultural needs and values. Building such empowering systems can support implementing more expressive and nuanced online selves that serve users' needs in further arenas of life.

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[6] The term "racism" mentioned by interviewees may actually coincide with xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment.

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Female supporters of Saudi's Al-Hilal attend their team's football match against Al-Ittihad in the Saudi Pro League at the King Fahd International Stadium in Riyadh on January 13, 2018. Saudi Arabia allowed women to enter a football stadium for the first time to watch a match that weekend, as the ultra-conservative kingdom eases strict decades-old rules separating the sexes.

Women's Sports Programs Are Challenging Saudi Arabia's Gender Divide

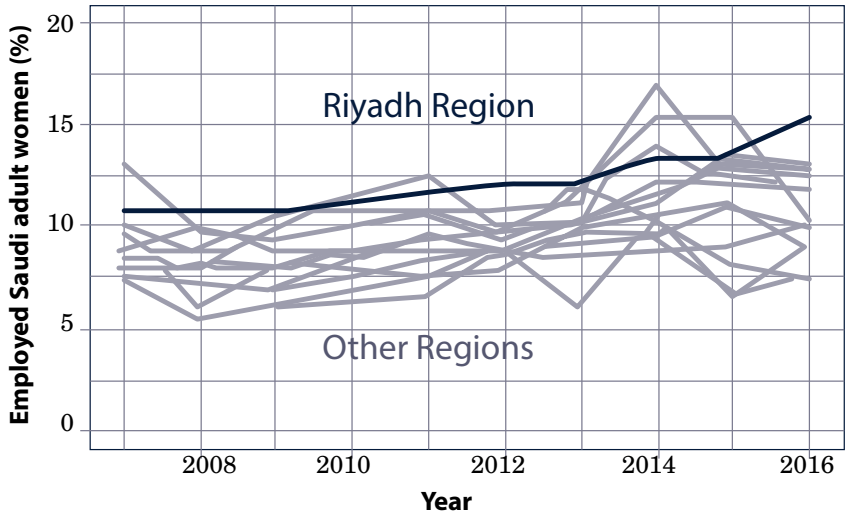
by Charlotte Lysa and Andrew Leber

For decades, global perceptions of Saudi society have been dominated by the country's strict gender policies. Namely, separate restaurants and cafes for single men and for families, a "guardianship" system that surpasses its Gulf neighbors in subordinating female agency to male control, and—most infamously—a complete ban on women driving.

But now, according to statements by Saudi Arabia's leaders and boosters, Saudi women are living in an age of opportunity. Female citizens could vote and hold office as of 2015, they had made incremental but noticeable gains in the clerical workforce, and women have made up a slim majority of university students since 2016.[1] Since then, gender relations have been changing at "hyper-speed," to quote one Saudi man in his late 30s marveling at the number of women, hair uncovered, crowding into mixed-gender spaces at a Jeddah coffee shop. Women should also be able to drive by this summer, and dividers are now being bolted onto stadium bleachers to allow Saudi women to attend football matches for the first time ever.

Although current reform efforts in Saudi Arabia suggest a genuine commitment to women's empowerment, Saudi policymakers are well-aware that news of greater women's rights helps drive positive international media coverage of the kingdom. Projecting an image of a more tolerant, inclusive country helps Saudi leaders attract greater foreign investment. The welcome news of granting women the right to drive starting in June 2018, for example, was tempered by revelations of the kingdom's clumsy efforts to keep female activists who had fought the driving ban out of the international press. While this was possibly aimed at heading off backlash from conservative Saudis, it was more likely an attempt to keep global media narratives focused on Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's top-down reform efforts. For this reason, understanding the complexity behind women's changing status in Saudi Arabia requires looking beyond the headlines to determine which "firsts" are largely symbolic and which portend systemic change for gendered policies in the kingdom.

Figure 1: Women's employment in Riyadh versus other regions in Saudi Arabia



Source: General Authority for Statistics, Saudi Arabia.

Periodic coverage of historic "firsts" for Saudi Arabia can also obscure the glacial process of extending policy change to the periphery and organizing movements that can slowly transform the country from below. At the same time, discussing Saudi Arabia strictly at the national level obscures divisions of class and geography that render women's advancement an uneven affair within the country. Women's employment has been consistently higher in the Riyadh region (see Figure 1), where major company headquarters and government offices can invest in the gendered architecture necessary to employ women. Likewise, the increasingly colorful and loosely worn abayas seen in trendy urban venues are all but absent in more conservative districts and rural areas outside Riyadh.

Healthy body, healthy citizen?

One area—physical activity—though rarely commented on in the English-speaking media is illustrative of Saudi Arabia's gender inequality given that female citizens' physical health notably lags behind men.[2] Until last year, there were no licensed female gyms and those that did exist typically charged fees that priced out middle- or lower-class Saudi women. With no physical education for girls in public schools, it is unsurprising that the main opportunity most women have for exercise outside the home is circulating mall floors in sneakers.

> One area—physical activity—though rarely commented on in the English-speaking media is illustrative of Saudi Arabia's gender inequality.

However, in recent years new opportunities have opened up in the field of women's sports. In 2016, Princess Reema bint Bandar al-Saud, known as a vocal advocate for women's rights in Saudi Arabia, was appointed vice president of Women's Affairs at the General Sports Authority. Following her appointment, licensing for female-only gyms commenced and a physical education program for girls in public schools was announced, which has slowly gotten underway since the fall of 2017.

The development of women's sports and physical activity is aligned with aspects of Saudi Vision 2030, a reform program aimed at social and economic transformation in the kingdom. Vision 2030 is partly motivated by the need to improve the physical health of the population, as well as developing new domestic outlets for consumer spending. Much as these can be interpreted as symbolic moves, they are laying the groundwork for increased female sports participation—implicitly acknowledging that sports, and football in particular, are to be considered open to both genders.

Already, some gyms known to operate without proper licensing have begun to formally register with the government. New gyms or even entire chain organizations catering to women have begun to appear. As one gym manager observed, "opening up for the licenses has caused gyms to pop up right and left—it is *the* hot industry to go into. Because it's a virgin market, everyone wants a piece of the cake."[3]

But providing gym access to all will require more than market mechanisms—not everyone has spare money to buy a membership. One gym owner noted that the makeup of his clientele was "mostly income driven" rather than a reflection of "liberal" women being more interested in exercise.[4] Physical education programs that plan to extend into conservative towns and villages may encounter extra resistance—then again, rural women have long been able to drive cars and trucks in Saudi Arabia, despite the strictly-enforced ban in urban areas.

In any event, expanding women's sports across Saudi Arabia will demand a great deal of investment in both facilities and human resources. To date, only one pilot project aimed at educating teachers for the public school program has been implemented—the number of new female teachers needed is massive, and male teachers are already hard to come by. The complete lack of any tradition of organized physical activity makes the project all the more challenging. "They [teachers] can't even think about: 'What have I done when I was a child'? 'What was fun'? [...] 'Who was a good teacher'? 'Who was a good coach'? They don't have this experience. We have to start at zero,"[5] said a sports official familiar with the process.

As a result, few concrete signs of progress in advancing women's physical education have followed the fanfare that accompanied last summer's announcement of the initiative. At a press conference in March, Minister of Education Dr. Ahmed al-Issa could only offer that the ministry was "beginning to implement some activities according to the capacities of different schools."[6]

Taking to the streets

As important as such top-down government initiatives are, they alone cannot transform a conservative country home to 30 million people. Grassroots efforts promoting fitness will have to—and already are—take hold. The Jeddah Running Collective (JRC), which caters to both Saudis and expats, predates top-down government initiatives and since 2013 has expanded to other cities beyond Jeddah.[7]

Last March, JRC arranged a run on March 8 for International Women's Day in three different cities in Saudi Arabia, which was broadcast live on social media. Some of the event's slogans were: "We are women hear us roar/In numbers too big to ignore!" and "female running renegades." The all-female contingent of the group said on social media (Figure 2) that they "have been changing women's sport narratives since 2013." The group is also growing in Riyadh, the conservative Saudi capital.[8] While the Riyadh chapter is keeping their runs open to women only, they are also pushing barriers by running in public and in busy urban areas where walking paths exist.[9] JRC may not be as headline-grabbing as ending the driving ban or sending in 2012 for the first time two female athletes to the Olympics, but the group is still helping carve out and maintain spaces for women.

Figure 2: Jeddah Running Club Instagram page

Saudi Arabia's top-down plans to reform gender relations deserves much praise, but the state must still devote substantial resources to supporting and enforcing its policies far from downtown Riyadh. Centralized policymaking could stand to benefit from more engagement with civil society organizations, like JRC, that are willing to meet state-led efforts halfway. Physical education is an easy target for state-society engagement on social reform issues in Saudi Arabia—demonstrated success here could be a harbinger for other more serious and lasting reforms to come.

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[4] Author interview, Riyadh, October 2017.

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[6] Majid al-Rifai, "Minister of Education to '*Sabq*': Physical Education Program for Girls 'Essential and Strategic Decision'," Sabq, March 12, 2018, https://sabq.org/ZzrCgG.

[7] Author interview, Jeddah, October 2017.

[8] Author interview, Riyadh, December 2017.

[9] Ibid.

A young Saudi couple walk past a clothes shop at a local mall in Riyadh on August 18, 2012.

The Growing Problem of Divorce for Young Saudi Men

by Mark C. Thompson

The Saudi Ministry of Justice 2016 statistics for divorce show some 157,000 marriages and 46,000 divorces, suggesting that almost 30 percent of couples end up separating.[1] Most divorces in Saudi Arabia—about 60 percent—occur early in the marriage, after the couple is exposed to "real life."[2] Increased social media usage is also an enabler, with 20 percent of divorces happening as a result of extramarital affairs or misunderstandings facilitated through the exchange of messages and photos on popular applications such as WhatsApp and Snapchat.[3] But many young men—according to those surveyed for this article—still argue that the culture surrounding arranged marriages is the largest factor ultimately exacerbating the growing problem of divorce.

The majority of young men report acquiescing to the traditional way of finding a wife, even though among friends they frequently discuss the possibility of making a "love match." Respect for parents and societal norms usually supersede personal preferences when it comes to choosing a bride. For this reason, young men across Saudi Arabia argue forcefully that a space for communication must be made available during the engagement period so the relationship can be ended if the couple is incompatible.[4] Divorce does not occur because of arranged marriages per se, they argue, but because of the lack of knowledge about a prospective partner.[5] The rising divorce rate seen across Saudi Arabia has in turn forced many families

One young man said it is common that prospective brides expect "knights of their dreams," while grooms think their brides are going to bring back "the days of their spoiled childhoods.

to be more flexible when it comes to courtship—providing adequate space for the couple to get to know each other during the engagement period.

False expectations

Another significant problem is that expectations of the future marriage partner (on both sides) are often wildly inflated. As far back as 2000, the Saudi author Dr. Mai Yamani observed that a symptom of these changing expectations was the rising divorce rate.[6] A young woman said that divorces are increasing not only due to a lack of communication and understanding between the two genders, but also because their expectations are totally different and frequently unrealistic.[7] One young man said it is common that prospective brides expect "knights of their dreams," while grooms think their brides are going to bring back "the days of their spoiled childhoods."[8] These unrealistic expectations are exacerbated by representations of gender roles on social media, particularly the "ideal" partners that celebrities project on Snapchat and Instagram.[9] Those interviewed said that judging an individual by how he/she looks on social media is extremely negative, but they also concede it is both highly addictive and an extremely common practice among young Saudis.

These "idealized" gender roles become evident when encountering mixed groups of young Saudis, with men often emulating celebrities to appear ultra-masculine and women ultra-feminine.[10] According to many young men—including some who are newly married—this typically occurs during the engagement period and early stages of marriage.[11] When real life does not match their imaginary ideals, the novelty of being a husband wanes. Some young men therefore return to their bachelor lifestyles, preferring to spend time with their friends at the *istiraha* ("relaxation spot")—often causing huge marital strain and divorce.[12]

In addition to official divorces, many married Saudis also experience a "silent divorce"—couples who stay together in name only due to social necessity and fear of public shame. Mohammad bin Ali Al Radi, director general of Mawadah Charitable Society, describes hidden divorce as a major problem threatening the fabric of Saudi society.[13] There are likely many broken marriages that go unreported because of conservative cultural norms. Young Saudi men are all too aware of the extent of these dissolved or unhappy marriages because if they don't directly experience it themselves, they certainly have or will see it happen to many of their friends.

The fact that relatively little in the way of marriage counselling is available in Saudi Arabia makes it harder to solve relationship troubles as they arise. There are few services available—even in major cities like Riyadh—and many people do not consider counselling a real option. If it does take place, it is usually carried out by an untrained family member. Although counselling is beneficial and can facilitate happier relationships, Saudis are extremely private people and reluctant to solicit outside help.[14] Furthermore, the cost and quality of existing services are also issues—most reputable counsellors are only available at private sector facilities that charge around 500 Saudi riyals ($133) a session.

The high costs of divorce

When divorces do happen, the high cost of getting married—often around 300,000 Saudi Riyals ($80,000)—can lead to financial hardship or ruin, especially for those who do not come from wealthy backgrounds.[15] Young men across Saudi Arabia say that it was cheaper to get married in the past, as nowadays everyone expects a "luxury" marriage. If a young man is lucky, he will have a wealthy father who will provide him

with a sumptuous wedding and all the necessities for married life. Indeed, societal pressure linked to socio-tribal traditions mean that if a father does not splash out a great deal of money on a large wedding the community will say he is not "man enough"—a particular problem for those who come from an influential tribe and family.

But many of these costs are in fact not traditional nor do they have any historical roots—they are new consumer habits that have become costly socio-cultural norms. In response, some young men hesitate or even question the need to get married out of fear of acquiring too much debt in case the marriage ends in divorce. Beyond the wedding itself, some young men cannot cope with the financial costs of being a newly-wed couple, particularly if they live beyond their means.[16]

Financial costs aside, many young men acknowledge that while divorce is bad for them, it is usually more problematic for women. Conservative gender norms make it more difficult for a woman to get remarried—when divorce occurs, it is usually the woman's reputation that is damaged.[17] Young men therefore contend that only when individual families and the wider society become more "open-minded" when considering the practice of marriage can the divorce rate be reduced.[18]

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[1] Katie Beiter, "Divorce Rates Skyrocket in Saudi Arabia," *The Media Line*, September 28, 2016, www.themedialine.org/women/divorce-rates-skyrocket-saudi-arabia.

[2] This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Saudi Arabia. The most important component of this fieldwork comprised approximately forty-five focus groups convened at multiple locations across the kingdom between October 2016 and June 2017, with each group consisting of between three to eight members. For the most part, the group participants were young Saudi men aged from 18 to 26.

[3] P.K. Abdul Ghafour, "Saudi divorce rate high: The 'message' is clear — stop abusing social media," *Arab News*, May 9, 2015, www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/744426. This concern is supported by Princess Sarah bint Musaed, chairperson of the Board of Directors of Mawadah Charitable Organization, who reveals that 60 percent of divorces occur in the first year of marriage.

[4] Views expressed by multiple focus groups across Saudi Arabia between 2016-2017.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000), 111.

[7] Focus group with three females in Riyadh, May 4, 2017.

[8] Riyadh focus group, February 2017.

[9] See, for example: Anon, "Turkish soap 'Noor' takes Arab world by storm," *Al Arabiya*, August 25, 2008, https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/08/25/55419.html.

[10] Views expressed by multiple focus groups across Saudi Arabia between 2016-2017.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Riyadh focus group, April 2017.

[13] Anon, "'Hidden divorces' threaten fabric of Saudi society", *Arab News*, July 23, 2016, http://www.arabnews.com/node/958346/saudi-arabia.

[14] Riyadh focus group, May 2017.

[15] Safwa focus group, January 2017.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Riyadh focus group, February 2017.

[18] Views expressed by multiple focus groups across Saudi Arabia between 2016-2017.

The facilities of Northwestern University and Carnegie Mellon branch universities at Education City, Doha, Qatar.

Women Are Key to Developing a Knowledge-based Economy in Qatar

by Hind Al-Ansari

For more than a decade, there have been major plans to reform the educational sectors of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. In Qatar, revenues from hydrocarbon exports allowed the country to focus on reforms that aim to educate and prepare nationals for leadership roles across a range of sectors. As part of these efforts, in 1995, the former emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani established Education City (EC), which comprises a number of prestigious American and European universities.[1] Despite creating numerous quality educational institutions, conservative cultural norms at the family level have hindered many Qatari females wishing to fully partake in this world-class education.

As for Qatari men, many are failing to take advantage of expanded educational opportunities to the same degree as their female counterparts. The former president of Qatar University, Sheikha Al-Misned, has dubbed these unenrolled young men "the missing boys,"[2] describing their absence from the national higher education system as a threat to the robustness of the labor market and the prospect of building a knowledge-based economy.[3] However, many young Qatari men are not incentivized to pursue higher education because they are able to secure—more so than women—a well-paid career in the public sector or military without holding a college degree.

While more women enrolling in university has caused some changes in popular attitudes about gender roles, the cultural shift is in its early stages. Families still devote disproportionate energy to shielding

young females from perceived physical threats and foreign cultural influences. For example, many parents don't consider sending their daughters to EC—despite the academic excellence of its many universities—because of the co-ed environment. They are apprehensive about normalizing male-female interactions outside the classroom.[4] These conservative families often view women as morally vulnerable and they therefore discourage any behavior that might stigmatize their reputation. In contrast, there are far less restrictions placed on men, even if they act against Islamic and conservative social principles.

Education in a conservative culture

To assuage family concerns, the Qatari state has committed to enforcing the same social mores on EC campuses as in the broader society. For example, if students are caught breaking Qatari moral codes on campus, security guards will report them to the authorities. This includes women wearing short or revealing outfits and male and female students expressing physical affection toward each other. Yet these policies cannot completely contain changing social attitudes—particularly among young people—about gender roles. The fact that EC has far less restrictions on academic freedom than public universities means that discussions about gender inequality, gender politics, and feminism frequently take place in classrooms and public lectures. A similar dynamic exists between public and private universities in other Gulf states.[5]

Although changing norms can be empowering for women, there are often cultural consequences. While no hard data exists, there are reports that some Qatari men refuse to wed women who regularly interact with men or have male friends.[6] Many females likely get married before enrolling in university to avoid this issue, as women are taught from a young age that marriage is the ultimate life goal. This leaves women with two difficult options—marrying young before enrolling in university at EC or pursuing higher education at more socially-regulated and less prestigious institutions. In the latter case, this translates into more limited learning options than women who are able to attend university in EC.

That being said, even universities outside EC are starting to loosen their cultural restrictions. Qatar University (QU), the country's leading public university, has begun to establish co-curricular programs and promote itself as open to international students. Females already represent a slight majority at QU—at 51 percent—of the student body, and international students make up 24 percent. But QU is still segregated and this could potentially create challenges down the road for women, especially those who might end up in a mixed workspace.[7]

Psychologists have discussed the college experience in relation to theories of cognitive stimulation and development. Diane Ruble suggests that students' experiences in college, especially during the first year, challenge their conventional ideas and perspectives that they brought with them from back home.[8] The opportunity to interact with diverse groups of people—including those from other cultures as well as the opposite gender—is particularly important to stimulating cognitive development. It also allows female students to become more open to cultural change, which is especially important in a rapidly changing country like Qatar. Qatari women who graduate from universities with an environment similar to QU therefore graduate with a less comprehensive educational environment than what is offered in EC or even abroad.

Change is coming, gradually

The Gulf states are investing heavily to develop a knowledge-based economy—and integrating women better into the workforce is a government priority, considering the educational achievement gap Qatari women have over men. Despite the cultural skepticism and setbacks, women continue to seek educational and professional success. The Gulf countries have in fact seen the sharpest rise in educational achievement for women in the entire Arab region.[9] Many females realize excelling in their studies is not only about re-

While more women enrolling in university has caused some changes in popular attitudes about gender roles, the cultural shift is in its early stages.

ceiving academic rewards and recognition, but it can provide the opportunity to partake in graduate programs at home or abroad. Many women are in turn eschewing early marriage, seeing cultural traditions as limiting their future career potential.

To continue to minimize the concerns of families, the Qatari government is juggling between the demands of importing Western educational standards and the need to establish gradual, yet effective change in a traditional culture. Ultimately, the main goal should be to establish gender equality to maximize the Qatari participation in the local economy and depend less on imported foreign expertise. But the success of such an undertaking will depend not only on strengthening the country's formal educational institutions, but also continuing to change popular attitudes about the role of women in society.

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[1] According to the Qatar Foundation's website, the organization's mission is to "nurture the future leaders of Qatar [and] to develop a sustainable human capacity, social, and economic prosperity for a knowledge-based economy," https://www.qf.org.qa/about/about.

[2] Sheikha Al-Misned, "The Dearth of Qatari Men in Higher Education: Reasons and Implications," *Middle East Institute*, June 20, 2012, http://www.mei.edu/content/dearth-qatari-men-higher-education-reasons-and-implications.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Mounira Charrad, "Kinship, Islam, or Oil: Culprits of Gender Inequality?," *Politics & Gender* 5, no. 4 (2009): 546-553.

[5] Rana AlMutawa, "Women and Restrictive Campus Environments: A Comparative Analysis Between Public Universities and International Branch Campuses in the UAE," *Gulf Affairs* (2017).

[6] Nadya Al Awainati, "What Does it Mean to Be a Woman in Qatar in 2008?" *Qatar Narratives*, 2008, 32-33, https://wikieducator.org/images/c/c9/Qatar-narratives-english.pdf.

[7] AlMutawa, "Women and Restrictive Campus Environments," 2017.

[8] Diane Ruble, "A Phase Model of Transitions: Cognitive and Motivational Consequences," *Advances in Experimental Social psychology* 26 (1994): 163-214.

[9] John Willoughby, "Segmented Feminization and the Decline of Neopatriarchy in GCC Countries of the Persian Gulf," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 28, no. 1 (2008): 184-199.

III. Commentary

Gender Politics and Women's Leadership in Kuwait

by Alanoud Alsharekh

Local authorities have fallen behind other Gulf states in launching gender equality initiatives

Kuwait was one of the first Gulf states to introduce public schooling for women, and by the mid-1960s Kuwaiti women were actively engaged in the labor market. Yet when the first parliamentary elections were held in 1963, Kuwaiti women were not included in the democratic process. The consequences of this exclusion still persist today, with Kuwait ranked 129th globally for women's political empowerment. With a lone female MP and just two cabinet ministers, it's not surprising that Kuwait ranks so low. According to UNDP figures, only 12 percent of women occupy leadership positions in Kuwait's public sector, with the private sector doing only marginally better at 15 percent. Thirteen years on from gaining their full political rights in 2005, Kuwaiti women are still struggling to be included in government and secure leadership positions based on their qualifications and merit.

Since 2005, there have only been eight female ministers and seven women appointed to the Municipality Council (and none since 2013). Although Kuwaiti women have been able to run for office since the 2006 elections, with 28 running at that time, harsh media treatment has deterred more from seeking office. Fear of failure has also played a factor—only eight women have won seats since 2006, with just six managing to assume office. Of the small number of women who have reached leadership roles, many are recycled across posts—including Minister of Housing Jinan Bu Shihri, who was one of those appointed to the Municipal Council. The real number of women in leadership positions is therefore smaller than even what these modest numbers at first suggest.

Structural obstacles for women

Barriers to women's leadership in Kuwait are entrenched and therefore difficult to overcome. Kuwaitis are not used to seeing women in leadership positions in the religious, economic, or industrial spheres. The government has tried to bolster women's political participation—for example, in 2012 it promised to ensure women were employed in the justice sector. But the government has not yet honored its pledge—there hasn't been a single appointment despite graduating over 20 female district attorneys in 2015 for that very purpose.

Kuwait's laws are also impediments to having more female leaders. Guardianship over women in tribal- and kinship-based patriarchal societies like Kuwait's translates into legislation and policies that limit women's autonomy. Unfortunately, the wording of many laws in Kuwait and other Gulf states renders women as the legal property of their male guardians. That means they require consent for something as personal and basic as getting married.

Closed male circles also make it difficult for women to break through. The "diwaniyya" culture, a network of alliances and pressure groups that influence leadership ascent, is often a prohibitive

barrier for women in Kuwait. Dr. Faiza al Khorafi, the first woman to become chancellor of Kuwait University, may have been as qualified as anyone else to fill the position, but having influential male family members may also have been a helpful factor in her hiring. Her late brother Jasim al Khorafi was parliamentary speaker, and her husband Ali al Ghanim is chairman of Kuwait's Chamber of Commerce—they could contribute to her ascent through political deal-making. Without intervention by powerful males, it is very difficult for women to access leadership positions. That's especially true when there are also economic, educational, or political obstacles to overcome.

Countries like Sweden and Finland, which have a proportional electoral system, have more women in leadership positions because they make it easier for women to be included in the political process. Where women are forced to go it alone as independent candidates, like in Kuwait, it is exceedingly difficult for them to break into leadership roles in politics but also trade unions, corporate boards, and sports clubs.

A country's political maturity and experience with participatory democracy are thus indicators of high rates of female leadership. In Kuwait, the inclusion process is still fairly new and so there needs to be strong political will to guarantee that women make it to decision-making positions. Kuwait would do well to look at the 2013 example of Saudi Arabia's King Abdallah enforcing a 20 percent quota for women on the Shura Council despite societal resistance. A more recent example to emulate is Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashed's announcement that the UAE will commit itself to gender parity in government posts. Kuwait's leadership has yet to publicly endorse similarly empowering measures in such a forceful and top-down manner.

Gender stereotypes are also barriers

Gender discrimination permeates Kuwait's public and private institutions in ways that make women less likely to end up in leadership positions. The media often focuses on women as sexual playthings and is no friend to female leaders. Reporters tend to be more critical of women and ridicule their performance and physical appearance in ways that most male leaders don't have to deal with. Women are also portrayed negatively in educational curricula, making it difficult to challenge the indoctrinated view that women are inherently domestic creatures who belong in the kitchen. These views reinforce stereotypes that women are not leadership material and thus make it harder for them to be taken seriously in senior roles.

Gender discrimination permeates Kuwait's public and private institutions in ways that make women less likely to end up in leadership positions.

Policies that encourage segregation, like those that were implemented in Kuwait University and by extension all higher learning facilities post-1998, are a real impediment to women's leadership because this division shrinks and constricts the space available for them. It socially isolates women from men and from taking on "male" roles—including leadership positions—returning them to a tightly controlled domestic space.

A lack of awareness among Kuwaiti women about their legal rights and how they're denied leadership roles on a systematic basis doesn't help either. Collective frustration with female underrepresentation remains the only road to genuine change. However, the Supreme Council of Development and Planning's recent program to train women for leadership positions as part of Kuwait's Vision 2035 goals, as well as private sector initiatives such as Ibtkar's Empowering Kuwaiti Women in Politics program, are modest steps in the right direction.

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Gender Equality Constraints in the Qatari Workplace

by Amal Al-Malki

The surge in rates of working women in Qatar masks still-entrenched gender inequality

In recent years, more Qatari women have become active participants in the workforce. Women's participation in various roles and different sectors across Qatar's economy mirrors an increasing confidence in their abilities. The importance of their economic role is also highlighted in official discourse, with the Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030 defining women's empowerment as a key human and social development pillar. Women have therefore become an integral part of national development plans, and their participation has become a domestic priority—putting them at the forefront of the national development strategy.

The Qatari government's continuous efforts to promote the employment of women has already yielded tangible results. According to 2017 data from the Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, the number of employed Qatari women has reached 36 percent of the labor force. Yet better female representation in the workforce doesn't necessarily mean that society, or employers, have accepted the new phenomenon of working women—or granted them equal social status and rights.

Cultural expectations

Cultural norms about gender roles remain a determinant of society's tolerance of women's involvement in the workplace. In Qatar, society continues to this day to prefer certain occupations for women, particularly in the education and social services sectors. The advent of Western education and the introduction of STEM and other disciplines has challenged these cultural boundaries somewhat. However, there is still a preference for women to secure jobs that require the least amount of contact with men and demand minimum mobility. For these reasons, the high number of women university graduates does not translate into higher rates of working women in Qatar.

The dichotomy between placing cultural restrictions on women and at the same time needing them to advance the country's economic development is apparent everywhere. But women, whose minds are set on building careers of their own, have still chosen to put their professional success first. Many are postponing marriage plans, which has already caused the average age of marriage to rise steadily. Working women are also choosing to have fewer children to better balance work and family life. The burden of all household responsibilities, such as caring for children and the elderly, is still expected to fall almost entirely on women. This leaves women to choose between their career or their family.

Discrimination persists

The dramatic increase in the number of working women in Qatar implies that the workplace has

embraced them—creating the pretense that they are treated equally to men. But the application of cultural restrictions hidden with a legal framework is contributing to gender inequality. For example, while all work positions are open to women in principle, cultural considerations continue to determine the roles that are available to women. Legal restrictions also play a role—for example, women still need to obtain their guardian's approval for employment and cannot travel without their guardian's permission unless they are over 25 years of age. This, of course, completely undermines all claims of equality in opportunity, given the power of traditions and cultural considerations.

Regarding pay and compensation, Article 93 of the Qatar Labor Law dictates that women should be paid equally for performing the same job as men. But this does not happen in practice. All statistics show that men are earning more than women for performing the same job—to be sure, this is a global phenomenon and not specifically unique to Qatar. Women don't receive the same benefits as men, either. Among couples, men obtain marriage-related allowances while women need to prove their eligibility to claim the same benefit. Again, this issue is not specific to Qatar, but it demonstrates that gender-based inequality that contravenes laws are still widely practiced in the country.

Of all the gender discrimination issues women in Qatar face, the one that most needs to be urgently addressed is that of sexual harassment in the workplace. Unfortunately, sexual harassment is a social taboo that is rarely discussed in formal or informal public conversations. Far too many incidents go unreported, resulting in women choosing to leave their jobs because of their justifiable fear of getting blamed for harassment. As is so often the case in patriarchal societies, women pay the price for men's misconduct.

The lack of official reports on sexual harassment also leads to a lack of statistics, making it difficult for researchers to investigate and develop policy recommendations. Although some cases are leaked to alternative media outlets, mainly online journals and blogs, they are rarely discussed in real-life settings. That's why there is a dire need for a sexual harassment law in Qatar that covers the workplace. Because of the cultural considerations, such a law would need to be communicated positively through a culturally-sensitive awareness campaign that draws attention to this issue.

> The dichotomy between placing cultural restrictions on women and at the same time needing them to advance the country's economic development is apparent everywhere.

What next?

Women's empowerment, as much as it is a path for building capacity and ensuring women are qualified to assume leadership roles, will be difficult if a few fundamentals are not reformed first. To begin with, educating women about their rights and responsibilities is the fundamental steppingstone before a conversation about women's empowerment can be initiated. Education can help society redefine its relationship with, and expectations of, women in general and working women in particular. The government and its official platforms needs to take responsibility for supporting working women through educating and reshaping society's perception of women's roles. Lastly, legislators need to develop gender-sensitive legislation that is fair to women and that protects them in both the public and private spheres.

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Despite Worthy Reforms, Saudi Women are Still Second-class Citizens

by Hatoon Al Fassi

Saudi progress toward gender equality is tangible but fails to address the root causes

The reality of women lacking full citizenship rights is neither new nor exclusive to Muslim, Arab, or Saudi women. It is a patriarchal tradition that dates at least as far back as ancient Greece, when the concept of citizenship was first established in the fifth century BCE and only included men. As both the past and present demonstrate, granting anyone her or his rights is not necessarily a straight forward task, as it can conflict with political, religious, economic, and patriarchal power.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, all of these variables come together to collide against women's citizenship rights. A Saudi culture of misogyny based on a hardcore reading of Islam fused with a harsh capitalist economy has exploited women for decades if not centuries. However, some recent developments—like allowing women to drive starting June 2018—are empowering women in the kingdom. Yet these recent reforms still do not go far enough to free Saudi women from their second-class citizenship status.

Saudi citizenship, in context

Like many other Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia embraced modernity very recently. The country was established in 1932 by King Abdulaziz bin Saud, who unified the kingdom under his family's name. Ibn Saud established a national identity by gathering and assembling the tribesmen under a conservative view of Islam. The concept of "citizen" developed under Ibn Saud adopted the *jus sanguinis* model, which incorrectly interpreted a Quranic text (al-Ahzab 33:5) that nationality is strictly patrilineal. *Jus sanguinis* is a patriarchal system compared to the more equitable *jus soli*, which confers citizenship by place of birth rather than by blood. Saudi Arabia, along with 15 other Arab states still maintain the *jus sanguinis* system today.

It was not until the 1970s that Saudi women became more educated and began to call for their rights. Because the religious understanding of genealogical affiliation in Saudi Arabia is patrilineal, the notion of citizenship became a religious domain—and recognized the male citizen only. In the past, citizenship based on male lineage was not just limited to Saudi Arabia or Islamic interpretations—Western countries, with different religions and varying levels of secularism, followed that same tradition. *Jus sanguinis* was in fact the world norm in the 19th and mid-20th centuries.

In recent years, women's right to pass their citizenship onto their children has become a major demand for activists in the Gulf region and across the Arab world. Even though all Gulf states have at least one article in their constitutions or basic laws emphasizing citizenship equality, women are not able (with the exception of the UAE,

where citizenship may be passed to children of Emirati mothers when children reach six years of age) to pass on their nationality to their children—citizenship is determined by the male father. For this reason, in November 2017 women formed a coalition called "The Gulf Campaign for the Rights of Children of a National Mother," which is calling for equal treatment between male and female citizens when it comes to citizenship rights. Women in the Gulf are very vocal in voicing their dissatisfaction with the states' insistence on mixing citizen's rights with religious rights.

Personally, I had a long struggle with *Al-Riyadh* newspaper to publish a piece explaining the difference between citizenship and religious rights—my editors thought I was stepping on sacred grounds. Luckily, it was eventually published and it joined a growing list of writings on the still-unresolved issue of women passing on their citizenship to their children.

Window dressing or genuine reforms?

There are some areas where the children of Saudi women and non-Saudi men are getting benefits—particularly in the education and health sectors. But the benefits for these children are temporary and terminate once the mother dies. The sons and daughters of a Saudi woman and non-Saudi man are also able to collect points all their lives that go toward naturalization, but eventual citizenship is not guaranteed. These children spend all their lives as foreigners in their mother's home country, exposed to painful official and social discrimination. Many prefer to leave their countries and live abroad where they can maintain their dignity and raise their kids away from these discriminatory practices. With 2012 data showing 750,000 Saudi women married to non-Saudi men—the country has an average fertility rate of 3 children per woman—there could be well over one million living under such circumstances.

Despite everything, the Saudi state is to some degree trying to solve the problem of gender inequality. Yet Saudi Arabia still fails for the most part to address the root of the problem. Recent news about ending the female driving ban are positive steps but they don't change the reality that Saudi woman are second-class citizens in their own country.

> In recent years, women's right to pass their citizenship onto their children has become a major demand for activists in the Gulf region.

Dr. Hatoon Ajwad Al Fassi is a Saudi historian and writer, and can be reached at Hatoon@gmail.com or on Twitter at: @hatoonalfassi.

Saudi Arabia Must Scrap its Male Guardianship System

by Caroline Montagu

Abolishing the mahram system is key to advancing women's rights in the kingdom

Saudi women still have far to go to achieve their rights but they are heading in the right direction. They are showing great energy and determination to advance the cause of gender equality. Their determination was recently on display at Davos 2018, when Princess Reema bint Bandar, head of the Saudi Federation for Community Sports and champion of sports facilities for women, called for greater women's rights in the kingdom. Princess Reema said gender equality is a driving force for positive economic change and that Saudi Arabia should not simply promote equality because of Western pressure but because it is the right thing to do. She also said that from the standpoint of family dynamics gender segregation is ethically wrong.

Saudi authorities have to some extent heeded the calls of women like Princess Reema. Notably, officials announced that women would be allowed to drive starting June 2018. The kingdom has also announced it would soon permit cinemas, concerts, and sports programs in schools. A sexual harassment law that has been awaiting ratification since 2013 is also likely to pass before the driving ban ends in June. But these gains, despite benefiting Saudi women, do not address the unjust *mahram* (male guardianship) system. Only once it is fully abolished will women have achieved their most important goal.

Mahram and other legal matters

In April 2017, the Saudi government passed a Royal Decree banning the *mahram* system in certain circumstances. While this was a positive step, the decree has not been implemented. Tradition in Saudi society is very strong—probably half the population are conservative and see these moves as un-Islamic. That's too bad because nowhere in the Quran or Hadith is the use of *mahram* even mentioned.

To clarify the matter, a women's group from the Eastern Province studied the only 75 verses in the whole Quran that deals with women. Within the texts, there was no mention of a *wali al-amr* (male guardian) except for minors and the mentally disabled. Further, looking at recent legislation, the group highlighted Saudi Arabia's Basic Law Article 8 that says all people are equal regardless of gender.

Among legal matters, the *mahram* system is not the only issue Saudi women must contend with. Women have been penalized when appearing in court by the attitude of judges, the varying interpretations under sharia law, and the built-in bias that favors men over women. Increasing the number of women lawyers who go to court and represent women would help offset this issue.

Saudi leaders have recently enacted significant reforms in several areas that are benefitting

women. Alimony has become a state responsibility—with a fund that women can draw from even before divorce proceedings are complete. The new system transfers responsibility from the husband to the state—ensuring that women are taken care of even if husbands miss payment deadlines. The state has also made progress with children's custody. Women no longer have to file a lawsuit to keep their children even if they plan to remarry.

And yet, achieving gender equality isn't just about enacting new laws but enforcing those already on the books. If existing laws were enforced, Saudi women would be in a far better place than now. For instance, the need for a *wakil* (male power of attorney) was made illegal some years ago, even though companies often still demand it.

The issue of financial dependence

Beyond legal matters, empowering Saudi women financially would advance their rights by giving them more autonomy. Government initiatives such as the Small and Media Enterprises (SME) General Authority, the National Transformation Plan, and the Musharakah program for funding SMEs help. Women do not have a problem with making and managing companies—when given the opportunity, they are competent business leaders.

Yet there is still opposition to working women from conservative families, and they have authority over their daughters. Even when young women do manage to embark on professional careers, they are compelled to meet a number of unwritten codes that dictate appropriate behavior. While more economic sectors are open to women than in the past, they are sectors—such as retail—that are generally for less-educated women. There are not enough jobs for graduate Saudi women, and there is a serious labor market mismatch between women's education and those jobs that are available to them.

That being said, it's hard to get a balanced view of women's status in Saudi Arabia. In the private sphere, women are powerful and choose the marriages and run the household. In conservative non-urban areas, women are less powerful in the public arena—and are often banned from leaving the house. But that does not mean they are less powerful in the private sphere or among extended family. In any case, the government's reforms need to reach all Saudi women—including those outside the urban axis.

Women are central to Saudi Arabia's efforts to reform and diversify the country's oil-dependent economy and put the kingdom on a more sustainable footing.

Prosperity for all?

Saudi Arabia is in a state of flux, partly due to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 and the National Transformation Plan. These ambitious reform programs are a response to low oil prices, rapid population growth, a bloated public sector, and a small private sector that adds little to the kingdom's GDP.

Women are central to Saudi Arabia's efforts to reform and diversify the country's oil-dependent economy and put the kingdom on a more sustainable footing. Many officials hope Saudi women—who already surpass men in educational attainment—will help supplant some of the more than 11 million foreign workers who are vital to the functioning of the Saudi economy. But the *mahram* system and other legal and cultural forces are preventing women, and thus Saudi Arabia, from reaching their full potential.

Caroline Montagu is a journalist who has covered Saudi Arabia since the 1980s and is a committee member of the Saudi-British Society.

The UAE is Making Strides in Closing the Gender Gap

by Muna Al Gurg

Lessons can be learned from the UAE's ongoing efforts toward greater gender balance

I'm frequently asked the same question: does the glass ceiling still exist for Arab women? The short answer is of course it does, as with everywhere else in the world. Despite some recent and robust government initiatives aimed at empowering women, the Gulf region's fiercely patriarchal society continues to curtail the more sweeping change I have come to expect.

Our society still discourages talk of gender inequality. When I attend women's social gatherings—namely weddings or dinner parties—discussion is typically limited to who married whom and the latest trends in fashion. As far as I can tell, there's no discussion of the arts and sciences, and little interest is shown in the latest technological trends or the achievements of high-impact social enterprises. In fact, for at least a decade, I'd regularly see one particular woman at these functions, usually weddings, only to later find out at a business mentoring session that not only does she run a successful women's social enterprise but she also won the region's Acumen Fund Award for Social Impact. I had no idea.

The main reason for all of this is family expectations. It may be 2018 but men's opinions still matter a great deal in a patriarchal society. Social pressures weigh on the decisions women make and therefore shape the direction in which their lives take. This reality reduces choice for women in much more powerful ways than it does for men. It's common, for example, for an academically gifted woman to study in her home country even when her less studious brother goes abroad to attend a top university.

Women's status over time

The Gulf countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are geographically close, but they exhibit relatively diverse cultural nuances—particularly when it comes to attitudes toward women in society. Over the past century, Kuwait has generally had a more liberal and progressive attitude to women's rights. Education plays a role—the region's first secular school, Al Mubarakiya, opened in 1911. Kuwait maintained the Gulf region's best schools through to the 1960s—its textbooks were even adopted in the UAE despite their prefaces having a portrait of the Kuwaiti emir. This "head start" for Kuwaiti women gave them the breathing room to pursue occupations that were unconventional for their time—such as artists, actors, physicians, and psychologists.

During the 1940s and 1950s, women in the Gulf worked to some extent, typically selling handiwork and food supplies. Since gaining independence from British rule in the 1960s and onward, the Gulf region has come a long way in both education and women's workforce participation. In the 1970s, women obtained the right to work—even though they were limited to segregated workplaces, which largely restricted their career options to

areas like education. Today, women are able to work in a greater number of fields, though society still frowns upon women who work late hours and frequently travel abroad.

The UAE case study

Within the last decade, there has been a huge drive to achieve greater gender equality—particularly in the UAE. Since Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum became ruler of Dubai in 2006, he has repeatedly advocated for women's empowerment through various decrees and laws. Sheikh Mohammed also launched several non-profit organizations such as Dubai Women's Establishment and Dubai Business Women's Council, both of which provide women a platform to network and develop their business skills.

In 2015, Sheikh Mohammed established a Gender Balance Council, a Gender Balance Index, and introduced quotas for women on corporate boards. Today, 9 out of 31 ministerial positions in the UAE are held by women, a further example of the efforts being made by the government. Moreover, UAE Ambassador to the UN Lana Nusseibeh recently completed her term as president of the UN-Women Executive Board for 2017, the UN's governing body dedicated to advancing gender equality. Nusseibeh's example has had a large impact on reducing patriarchal views, and we now see men playing a more supportive role in their wives', sisters', and daughters' lives.

We also see a small but growing number of female engineers, lawyers, physicians, and pilots across the UAE. Women in the UAE are also making progress in accessing informal networks—to a large extent male-dominated ones—outside the work environment through networking organizations such as the Dubai Business Women's Council.

Another breakthrough took place in 2017 when it was announced that citizenship could be passed down to the children of Emirati women married to non-Emirati men when they reach six years of age. No other Gulf country grants women the right to pass their citizenship onto their children if their spouse is a foreigner. The rest of the Gulf governments need to follow the UAE's example and give women the same citizenship rights in this regard.

It's evident that Gulf officials are realizing the economic potential women offer—and acknowledging the gender gap and developing policies to address it.

What's next for Gulf women?

In the wider global sphere, more women working could add up to $12 trillion to the global economy in the next 10 years—and the Gulf region has become a lucrative place to do business. 1.5 million wealthy households in the Gulf region have assets totaling at least $2.2 trillion. Increasingly, many of the wealthy family businesses now include women who have taken control of their wealth (both from an investment and philanthropic perspective) as a result of merit or inheritance. Women across the Gulf region are beginning to take a seat at the table.

It's evident that Gulf officials are realizing the economic potential women offer—and acknowledging the gender gap and developing policies to address it. But as is always the case, success will depend on how these policies are executed. The Gulf region today has more gender balance initiatives in play than ever before. Gulf leaders have made significant commitments to bridging the gender gap—now it is society's turn to catch up.

Muna Al Gurg is the director of retail at Al Gurg Group, chairwoman of Young Arab Leaders UAE, and a board member of Emirates Foundation.

IV. Interviews

Mohammad Naciri
Regional Director
UN WOMEN Arab States

Gulf Affairs: What is the mission of UN WOMEN Arab States? Does the organization work directly with Gulf countries? If so, in what ways?

Mohammad Naciri: UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. In the Arab states, we work with governments, civil society, women´s rights activists, and men and women to advance women´s empowerment and gender equality. We mainly do this by focusing on a few areas, including increased economic empowerment, women´s leadership and participation, and ending violence against women and girls. More specifically, we work on an enhanced legislative and policy environment that is conducive to women´s rights, gender responsive budgeting, and supporting member states in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably Goal 5—*Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*. In addition, we coordinate the women´s empowerment agenda in the UN system.

We do work with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries directly, and we currently have programming in or with the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait. In all countries, even beyond the Gulf region, we work in partnership with government—they are our main counterparts and also finance in-country programming to

help create a more equal society. In Kuwait, we launched the first regional program on accelerating SDG 5, including establishing an incubator for women´s political leadership in the country. We also work with the private sector to encourage a more equal work environment.

Gulf Affairs: One of UN Women's stated goals is to increase female participation in leadership positions. As a man leading this effort in the Arab states, is this not antithetical to the agency's goals?

Naciri: I get this question a lot—and I respect that. I am humbled to be working with incredible women leaders from the region and beyond, and certainly they are the ones who drive the agenda. In our offices, the majority of the workforce—both at the managerial and working level—are women. That said, I appreciate that it may seem odd to have a man as the face of the organization in the region—but I am a strong believer in equality and in women´s leadership. In fact, across the UN system, UN Women being the exception, there is a disproportion in leadership positions, with more men than women. In the Gulf region, I have tried to address this shortfall by establishing an Arab women leadership track, investing in women´s leadership, and getting buy-in from other UN agencies to do the same. I am certain that down the road, I will be working for one of these women, and I would be honored to do so.

Gulf Affairs: How do you rate the status of gender equality in the GCC region? How does it vary among the different GCC states?

Naciri: I would rate the overall status as still a work in progress, with the positive caveat that this is something that the states themselves are aware of. Having committed themselves to the SDGs, Gulf leaders are working toward reaching them. While comparing different states is often counter-productive, I can say that there are some common issues within the region. Certain policies or legislation—though perhaps not intended to be—discriminate against women. This includes legislation prohibiting women from passing their nationality on to their children and the right to get a divorce, just to name a few examples. There are also issues with legislation (and access to data) around violence against women—and domestic violence in particular—though more and more countries are tackling this problem.

That said, violence against women continues to remain a major deterrent to equality. Without the proper measures in place to both prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, the pandemic will continue. While women are now able to vote and run for office across the Gulf region, the overall rate of female participation is among the lowest globally. The reasons for this are many; but temporary special measures—such as a quota system for women in public office—that we do see in some other countries globally and in the region are not introduced in the GCC.

Gulf Affairs: In recent years, what progress have GCC countries made vis-a-vis gender equality? Any milestones you find particularly promising?

Naciri: There are several milestones across the GCC—including women´s increased engagement in leadership, obtaining the right to vote, or reaching parity in education. The last milestone, which is a trend found across the Gulf region, is one of the key indicators of the Millennium Development Goals and is now also particularly important to the SDGs. It shows that more and more women are engaged in public life,

and that women´s voices are increasingly heard, recognized, and listened to on par with that of men. We are also seeing an increase in entrepreneurship—the youth bulge and the need to diversify the region's economy are leading to some very innovative female-driven ideas. Whenever young people take on a leadership role—and young women in particular use their voice—I am encouraged by what the future will hold. I do find it promising that we are seeing more of this, whether that's as a result of or reaction to the financial pressures in the region. Either way, it is a positive trend.

Gulf Affairs: How do you compare gender equality in GCC countries with the rest of the Arab world? Any unique trends or attributes?

Naciri: The GCC is unique in that women are on par (or have exceeded) men in attaining post-secondary education credentials, including in the arts and sciences. The main concern in the Gulf region is the disconnect between educational achievement and larger empowerment—so while the region does well in terms of education, it does not have more women in leadership roles or more women in the formal workforce. It is this nexus—between education and empowerment—that we have to bridge. More and more countries themselves are investing in creating a diverse workforce, because the evidence shows that if the gender gap is reduced by 20 percent, it could boost GDP by $415 billion in the Arab states alone. Capitalizing on the high level of education and ensuring that the policy environment is such that women have equal access to opportunities can certainly accelerate the Gulf's process of achieving the SDGs.

Gulf Affairs: What are the main obstacles to achieving greater gender equality in the GCC states?

Naciri: To truly achieve gender equality, one needs several tracks. The first is a conducive legislative environment that ensures that men and women are equal under the law, that there is no impunity for violence against women, that the justice system is functioning, and that the policies put in place are implemented. This is something that takes time, but we are seeing positive trends and gradual change.

The second, and perhaps more difficult track, is to change cultural norms and attitudes. Gender inequalities are deeply rooted in traditions, though not necessarily substantiated by anything beyond this. There is always an initial fear and resistance to change—and yes, also a discourse around this change being an attack on a culture. I dare argue the opposite, in particular in this region where women have played such a strong role in shaping our societies.

That being said, to change these norms and to come to a common understanding that a more gender equal society benefits all, we need to have conversations at the community level. This will have to include both men and women (who are often custodians of tradition) around how this change will positively affect growth and prosperity for all. Changing these norms takes time and requires an ongoing dialogue that is community-driven—a bottom-up approach to match the top-down policy changes that GCC governments are enacting.

Gulf Affairs: Given the role cultural and religious norms play in shaping people's ideas about gender issues, are there key differences between how UN Women and Arab states would like to tackle the issue of gender equality? If so, how do you reconcile these differences without compromising your ability to work with Arab governments?

Naciri: The facts speak for themselves: we know that societies will prosper when women are equal to men, we know a country's overall GDP will increase if women are equally represented in the workforce, and we know the cost on society decreases when violence against women declines. We also know that peace agreements are more likely to last when women are actively involved as leaders, and we know that governments in which women participate have social policies that better serve their nations.

These are the facts on which we base our programming, and they are the same across the world. In the Arab states, we work on this while also addressing the specifics of the region, including conflicts, socio-economic development, and the notion of culture (tradition and religion). As an example, for the first time in the region we conducted a study on masculinity—focusing on how women and men perceive their role and status in the family and society. It's incredibly important for us to address the root cause of inequalities, and to understand the pressures that men and women feel as a result of their sex. We have done the survey in four countries—Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Palestine—and are actually pioneering the same study in Kuwait, with a report scheduled for publication by the end of the year. What this study has done, and is doing, is that it is starting a conversation around masculine and feminine identities. We have found that many men, for example, would appreciate paternity leave. Having such data available, and being able to champion women and men who are working for a more gender equal society, is important for our work—and it shows that this change is indeed community-driven too.

Hend Alsheikh
Director General – Women Branch
Institute of Public Administration
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Gulf Affairs: What is the mission of the Women's Branch at the Institute of Public Administration (WIPA)? Any notable achievements over the past few years?

Hend Alsheikh: The Women's Branch shares the same vision as the Institute for Public Administration (IPA). Namely, both are actively participating in administrative development and fulfilling clients' needs by providing effective training that contributes to improved performance, research and consultation with added value, and comprehensive knowledge solutions that contribute to promoting sound administrative practices in the government and private sector.

Since the establishment of WIPA in 1982, we have focused on offering pre-service course diplomas. More than 5,000 skilled females have graduated from our programs, and each student typically receives three to seven employment offers upon graduation. In addition, we trained more than 100,000 female civil servants through workshops and both short- and long-term training programs. Our faculty provides large numbers of government agencies with free-of-charge consultations in the IT, human resources, office management, and other administrative fields. We have a very mobile team that serves females across the kingdom. We

believe that gender integration is an important mission of WIPA, and it is pursued through training, consultations, and knowledge dissemination activities.

Gulf Affairs: One of the goals of Saudi Vision 2030 is to increase women's participation in the workforce from 22 to 30 percent. How is WIPA contributing to this goal?

Alsheikh: First off, IPA has launched a number of initiatives that will be a major benefit to all civil servants—including women. These include the National Program for Administrative Leadership Training and Development, which seeks to empower leaders to achieve the kingdom's Vision 2030 goals; the National Program for Distance Training, which aims to improve the efficiency of civil servants through e-learning courses; and the National Training Framework, which will raise the productivity of government human capital through premium quality training.

That being said, WIPA is responsible for a Ministry of Civil Service initiative aimed specifically at empowering women and strengthening their presence in leadership roles. There are three projects under this initiative that are worth mentioning.

The first is the Gender Balance in the Civil Service initiative, which aims to establish the regulatory and legislative framework to ensure gender parity is achieved in all sectors and at all levels of government. As it currently stands, women are overrepresented in the health and education ministries, but almost totally absent from the justice, energy, industry, and other departments. The Ministry of Civil Service is developing strategies, plans, and policies to address this issue. The second initiative relates to empowering female leaders and specifically increasing their representation in decision-making roles. The third is the Strategy for Telework in the Civil Service, which aims to empower women living in remote areas who might otherwise find it difficult to come to work.

Gulf Affairs: What are the main obstacles hindering Saudi women from participating in the labor force?

Alsheikh: Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia has achieved gender parity in education, there is still a huge discrepancy between women's educational attainment and their economic participation. This is mainly due to institutional and social barriers. Saudi women face challenges posed by government policies and practices—their professional mobility is limited horizontally, being given different tasks than men at the same authority level, as well as vertically, with men clustered in higher level roles.

Though some women have reached the leadership level, the majority of those have limited decision-making authority. We realized at WIPA that training can only go so far if women are not offered the right opportunities in the first place. We are therefore engaged in a number of initiatives to expand women's opportunities from the bottom up. We believe that gender integration is not just a Saudi problem, but a global challenge, and we are adopting best practices within the local context.

Gulf Affairs: Is the private sector more receptive to employing Saudi women?

Alsheikh: The government sector is in fact the main employer of Saudi women. Forty-one percent of government employees are women, compared to just seven-and-a-half percent of total private sector employ-

ees. The number of Saudi females in the private sector, at five-and-a-half percent, is even lower as many of the kingdom's working women are non-nationals.

The reason Saudi women have such a low workforce participation rate in the private sector are manifold. The kingdom currently relies on a nearly unlimited supply of low-cost foreign labor, and most of these jobs are in traditionally male sectors such as construction. Bylaws also prevent women from fully participating in the private sector.

That being said, there have recently been labor market and legal reforms that have seen more women reach senior private sector positions across Saudi Arabia. Initiatives such as IPA's diploma offerings are also playing a role in helping women achieve leadership roles by ensuring they receive first-class training.

Gulf Affairs: What training efforts has WIPA tried to allow more women to enter the Saudi workforce?

Alsheikh: Training is one of the most important vehicles to enact change and create optimal outcomes. That's why we are working on introducing gender training at different levels—targeting human resource practices and policy formation at the individual, institutional, and community levels. We believe this will help create a positive mindset toward employing women in a general sense but also for leadership roles.

Gulf Affairs: A Royal Decree was issued on September 26, 2017 granting women the right to obtain driver's licenses. What impact will this have on female participation in the Saudi labor force?

Alsheikh: Transportation was one of the main obstacles to women's mobility, and so allowing women to drive enables them to reach their workplace on their own terms—it will facilitate mobility and decrease the cost of transportation. Therefore, it is a necessary step and will have a very positive impact in the long run on women. It will also create employment opportunities in many activities related to driving such as working for the police department, traffic control, transportation services, and even driving instructors.

Moodhi Mohamed Al-Suqair
Treasurer and Board Member
Women's Cultural and Social Society, Kuwait

Gulf Affairs: What role does the Women's Cultural and Social Society play in Kuwait?

Moodhi Al-Suqair: Since it was established in February 1963, the Women's Cultural and Social Society has played an important role in defending the social, cultural, economic, and political rights of Kuwaiti women. We do this through a number of programs that benefit women. These include raising awareness about women's health issues, child and maternal care, assisting women with disabilities and helping them in their daily needs, and cooperating with NGOs that focus on women's issues in the local, regional, and international contexts.

Gulf Affairs: Does the Society collaborate with institutions outside of Kuwait? If so, what have been your primary areas of focus for such collaboration?

Al-Suqair: The Society collaborates with institutions both inside and outside of Kuwait. It collaborates with several bodies of the United Nations such as UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and it has a special consultative status with the UN's Economic and Social Council. In

terms of non-UN bodies, we also work with Freedom House, the General Arab Women Federation, Kafa Organization and the Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF), among others.

The Society's focus when it comes to collaborative projects is on empowering women and enhancing their capacities in society. We've formed a Gulf-wide committee to demand that women can pass their nationality onto their children, conducted a study with UNIFEM on women in the field of politics, published a report on Kuwait's personal status law and other women's rights issues, launched a legal empowerment initiative for women with the UNDP called the Waraqati Project, and worked with Freedom House to establish the Norok Qanunok campaign aimed at raising awareness on the personal status law.

Gulf Affairs: How do you describe the status of women in Kuwait? How has their role in society evolved over the past few decades?

Al-Suqair: Women are half of Kuwait's society. Since the early 1960s, Kuwaiti women have played an active role in building the society and families alongside men in many fields.

One notable thing women have done is to empower themselves through higher education. As such, women have been able to demonstrate their ability to participate in leading their community and making important and successful decisions in various areas of work.

As for how women's status has changed in recent years, one of the most important developments relates to voting rights. In May 1999, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad approved an election decree that granted women the right to vote and run for the national assembly. However, the decree was obstructed by some parliamentarians and women in turn took up the issue with the highest court in Kuwait—filing a lawsuit on May 4, 2000. On May 16, 2005, women were finally granted their full political rights.

Another milestone happened on December 4, 2013, when Kuwait signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), which was aimed at enhancing efforts in the social, developmental, and political empowerment of women and giving them their equality with men in various fields. The MoU focused on protecting women's rights and combating all manifestations of discrimination against them and eliminating all forms of violence.

Also, the Committee for Women's Affairs was formed in Kuwait's National Assembly to study and take care of all civil and social rights related to women. The committee was also tasked with looking into amending laws that are not in the interest of women and enforcing the laws that already are in their favor. The committee also raised awareness among women about how to exercise all their rights.

Gulf Affairs: Since being granted the right to vote in 2005, very few women have succeeded in winning elections. In your opinion, what are the main barriers facing female politicians? How can these be overcome?

Al-Suqair: There are many obstacles. Kuwaiti society, like any other Arab society, is still dominated by patriarchy, customs, and traditions. Many in the country unfortunately believe that women are deficient and unable to compete with men.
Women also lack a political basis as men have dominated the political arena for 40 years through sports

clubs, cooperatives, and "diwaniyas." Women only began building their political base and asserting themselves as leadership competitors during the last ten years—they have not yet achieved what they are aspiring for. Political Islam, which has dominated the political arena for years, has also reinforced the idea that women are not eligible to take up political positions in parliament and elsewhere.

Gulf Affairs: What government policies would you like to see enacted that can support gender equality in Kuwait?

Al-Suqair: There are many policies that the government could pursue to support gender equality in Kuwait. The percentage of women in the public and private sectors is small compared to men. In the national assembly, there is just one woman member and the cabinet has only two female ministers. The government could use top-down measures to increase the number and percentage of females in leadership posts across Kuwait.

In terms of housing, granting women the same rights would go a long way to improving their status. Kuwaiti women married to non-nationals are not currently granted the same right to government housing that is suitable for them and their family, or government loans that would guarantee their purchase of homes with adequate living conditions. The Society has succeeded in convincing the housing agencies to approve the increase of housing loans for widowed and divorced women who have children to 45,000 Kuwaiti Dinars ($150,000), and we are still asking the agencies to raise it further to 75,000—this would be more in line with the loans Kuwaiti men currently receive.

There is also a need to pass legislation to criminalize violence against women. There is no law in Kuwait on the issue of domestic violence within the family. It is currently possible to use some articles of the Personal Status Law and the Penal Criminal Code in the event of a serious crime inside the home. But these articles are limited in their ability to cover all forms of domestic or family violence. It's also still difficult to quantify the extent of violence against women in Kuwait because conservative norms mean things often go unreported. One encouraging development is that civil society organizations are working to draft legislation criminalizing violence in all its forms.

Equally important, the state needs to spread awareness and challenge the culture of violence against women through school curricula, the media, and training programs. Broadcasting simple awareness programs on television would help reach the largest possible audience in both urban and rural areas. Also, increasing the number of seminars, lectures, and workshops in remote regions and sending telephone messages would contribute to realizing this goal.

Gulf Affairs: What would you say is the main barrier facing Kuwaiti women today?

Al-Suqair: One of the main barriers facing women is their ability to secure decision-making positions. Men are often preferred even when there are woman who are more competent and qualified. Although Kuwaiti women constitute a high percentage of the labor force, they tend to be concentrated in lower-level positions than men.

V. Timeline

Select developments in women's issues in the Gulf region since 2001

2001

Saudi Arabia ratifies the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

2002

Bahrain ratifies CEDAW.

Bahraini women vote and stand for elections for the first time ever.

2003

Sheikha Jufairi becomes the first Qatari woman to win an election in the Central Municipal Council.

Sheikha Al-Misnad becomes the first woman president of Qatar University.

May: Qatar appoints Sheikha Ahmed al-Mahmoud as Minister of Education, the first woman to hold a cabinet post.

2004

The UAE ratifies CEDAW.

March: Sultan Qaboos appoints Oman's first female minister with a cabinet portfolio, in this case the Ministry of Higher Education.

April: Bahrain appoints its first female minister, Nada Al Haffadh, who becomes minister of health.

2005

April: Saudi Arabia's top religious authority bans forced marriages.

May: Kuwait's parliament passes a bill granting women the right to vote and run for office.

June: Kuwait appoints two women to its Municipality Council, marking the first time women take up a post at the governing body.

2006

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum creates the Dubai Women's Establishment, which is aimed at researching women's status in the workplace and promoting women's development across the UAE.

Qatar adopts Law No. 22, granting women the right to be free of physical or moral harm from their husbands.

A Bahraini woman wins a seat in the Council of Representatives after running uncontested, becoming the first female MP in the country's history.

June: Bahrain is elected to head the UN's General Assembly and Haya Rashid Al Khalifa is appointed as president, making her the first Middle Eastern woman and the third woman in history to take up the post.

2007

July: The UAE sets up the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children to offer protection and support services to women and children who are victims of domestic abuse and human trafficking.

2008

December: The Women's Union in Bahrain presents a personal status draft law to parliament.

2009

King Abdullah University of Science and Technology opens as the first coeducational campus in Saudi Arabia.

May: Four Kuwaiti women win seats in parliamentary elections, the first time since women won the right to run for office in 2005.

2010

A new labor law in Kuwait allows women to work night shifts in certain private sector industries.

Oman issues a decree eliminating the need for women to obtain their guardian's approval for getting a passport.

2011

July: Kuwait's Ministry of Justice announces it will accept applications from women for "entry-level legal research" positions.

November: A decree grants the children of Emirati women married to non-Emirati men the opportunity to apply for citizenship when they reach 18 years of age, a first in the Gulf region.

2012

Qatari women participate in the Summer Olympics for the first time ever.

UN Women releases a report noting that Kuwaiti women occupy 40 of 518 executive posts in the country.

April: A Kuwaiti court decision cancels a ministerial order barring women from entry-level jobs at the Ministry of Justice.

December: The UAE makes it mandatory to have female board members in every company and government agency in the country.

2013

January: Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah grants women seats in the Shura Council for the first time ever.

August: Saudi Arabia issues a law making domestic violence a criminal offense.

September: The UAE appoints its first female permanent representative to the UN.

2014

The UAE opens the Khawla Bint Al Azwar Military School, the first military college for women in the region.

V. Timeline

2015

Qataris elect two women to the Central Municipal Council.

February: Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid announces the establishment of the Gender Balance Council in the UAE, which aims to support women in the workplace.

2016

A hashtag calling for the abolishment of the male guardian system in Saudi Arabia trends on Twitter as thousands of Saudi women sign the petition.

November: Safa Al-Hashem becomes the first Kuwaiti women to win in three consecutive parliamentary elections.

December: Oman appoints a senior female police officer to be in charge of a police department for the first time ever.

2017

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) applauds Oman's approach to family planning and reproductive health.

February: An Emirati woman named Lana Nusseibeh is elected as president of the UN Women Executive Board.

September: King Salman issues a decree allowing women to drive in Saudi Arabia starting June 2018, as well as to travel and study without a male guardian's permission.

October: The UAE announces that citizenship may be granted to the sons and daughters of Emirati women married to non-Emirati men after a minimum of six years from their birth date. The UAE as such becomes the first Gulf state to allow citizenship to pass from mother to child.

November: Qatar appoints four women to the Shura Council for the first time.

2018

Oman announces that women are allowed to drive taxis.

January: Saudi women are allowed to enter football stadiums as spectators for the first time.

June: Women begin to start driving in Saudi Arabia after a years-long struggle against the ban in urban areas.

Call for Articles

Finance in the GCC: Policy and Developments

Submission deadline: Friday, August 3, 2018
Word count: 1,000–1,500 words

***Gulf Affairs* invites scholars to submit original analytical articles for its upcoming issue on the theme "Finance in the GCC: Policy and Developments."**

Gulf Affairs is a journal founded by the Oxford Gulf & Arabian Peninsula Studies Forum (OxGAPS), a University of Oxford-based platform. The journal is dedicated to furthering knowledge and dialogue on the pressing issues and challenges facing the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Each issue focuses on a particular theme, allowing for a comprehensive discussion from various analytical perspectives and fields of study. Accepted articles are reviewed and edited prior to publication.

To capture the complexity of the various issues and challenges around foreign policies of the GCC states, articles are encouraged from a wide range of disciplinary lenses, including: Economics, Finance, Management, Politics/Political Economy, International Relations, Law, Psychology, Sociology, Area Studies and History. Balanced articles supported by sufficient and credible sources that offer a unique perspective on the theme will likely be accepted for publication.[1]

***Gulf Affairs* welcomes analytical articles on (though not limited to) the following areas:**

- What are the latest financial market trends in the Gulf states? What are the current prospects for IPOs in the region?
- How have sovereign wealth funds in the Gulf region developed and performed over time?
- What are the latest developments in bond issuance and debt markets in the GCC?
- How is financial regulation—such as insolvency laws—developing in the GCC?
- Have financial free zones and centers been successful in GCC countries?
- How is Islamic banking and finance developing across the Gulf states?
- What financial models and instruments will best support the financing of mega projects and national visions in GCC countries?
- What is the current status and outlook for fintech in the Gulf states? Will regulation keep pace with the technological disruptions caused by fintech?
- How are nationalization initiatives impacting the financial sector in the Gulf states? What are the human resource, education and training needs for the region's financial sector?
- What types of financing are supporting the growth and development of SMEs across the Gulf states? Is microfinance, crowdfunding and/or venture capital playing a role in supporting SMEs?
- What are the prospects for mergers and acquisitions in the region's banking sector?

Submission Guidelines: Please send articles to gulfaffairs@oxgaps.org by Friday, August 3, 2018. Authors whose articles have been accepted for review will be notified within two weeks after the submission deadline.

[1]For citations and referencing, use Chicago Manual of Style endnotes.

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