



RESEARCH PAPER

Women Rights in the Arab Gulf States: Impact of 9/11 and Arab Uprisings

Muhammad Azam

Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author** | writetoazam@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of the Arab uprisings and the events of 9/11 on women rights in the Gulf countries. In the aftermath of 9/11, how did the Arab Gulf states respond to global calls for democratic reforms? This is the key question explored in this study. The beginning of the twenty-first century saw the removal of various restrictions against women and the adoption of several reforms, both of which were met with positive reception on national and international levels. This qualitative study investigates the women-rights reforms introduced in the Gulf region following American after the 9/11 attacks. Similarly, the 2011 Arab uprisings alarmed the monarchs of the Gulf, leading them to adopt a carrot-and-stick approach. As a result, further reforms addressing women rights were introduced. Women in the Gulf states need to continue to push the boundaries for their rights and rightful liberties.

KEYWORDS 9/11, Arab Uprisings, Gulf States, Human Rights, Women Empowerment

Introduction

The ruling elite of the Arab Gulf States maintains a firm grip on power, significantly restricting freedoms and human rights. Women, in particular, have faced more severe limitations compared to men. However, with the advent of the twenty-first century, several of these restrictions have been lifted, and a range of reforms has been implemented. These changes have been welcomed both domestically and internationally. Two key factors contributed to this shift: firstly, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the United States government linked its security interests to the promotion of democracy in the Middle East, pressuring the Gulf States to adopt reforms. Secondly, the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and other countries raised concerns among the Arab monarchies of the Gulf, prompting them to respond to the growing demand for change. This study examines how the states and societies of the Arab Gulf responded to global calls for democratic reform following 9/11 and analyses the impact of the 2011 Arab revolutions on the region. Specifically, it explores how these events have influenced women's empowerment and the broader human rights landscape within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

Literature Review

The analyses provided by Hertog, Bronson, Hamzawy, and Kendall regarding the phenomenon that emerged in 2006 highlight a positive correlation between Saudi Arabia's reform efforts and the pressures exerted by the United States government. Hertog elucidated that the establishment of the National Human Rights Association (NHRA), the bar association, and early attempts at labor organization were likely motivated by a desire to appeal to an international audience. These developments occurred within a context of

specific phases of global scrutiny. It is noteworthy that Saudi politics has historically not prioritized adherence to international norms (Hertog, 2006, pp. 261–262).

The United States' involvement in promoting democracy within Saudi Arabia represents a relatively recent shift in policy. Bronson (2006, 258) asserts that prior to September 11, it was nearly impossible to channel U.S. foreign aid into the kingdom. In examining Saudi Arabia's political developments, Hamzawy (2007) observed that preceding years witnessed both domestic and international reform pressures, which injected new energy and openness into the kingdom's political landscape. Furthermore, Hamzawy (2006, 19) contended that the Saudi monarchy's reforms were driven by concerns regarding the future of its strategic partnership with the United States.

Empowering Women After the Arab Spring provides a theoretical framework for examining women's empowerment, with a focus on studies from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and other nations (Shalaby & Moghadam, 2016). Souad Ali (Ali, 2019) investigates issues related to gender equality and the ongoing women's rights movement in Kuwait. Karolak (2013) explores new initiatives aimed at women's emancipation, as well as the challenges that Bahraini women faced in their pursuit of empowerment following the Arab Spring. In his analysis of the complex legal and feminist debates in Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Arab Spring, Jihan Zakarriya (2024) identifies evidence of sustained women's activism, public influence, and political significance.

Material and Methods

The research investigation employs both primary and secondary sources of information. Among the primary sources utilized are interviews and official government documents, which were instrumental in assessing the impact of the events of September 11 and the 2011 Arab uprisings on the advancement of women's rights and human rights in the Arab Gulf States. By examining these official records, a comprehensive understanding of the region's political climate was achieved. Additionally, secondary materials significantly contributed to the research; these included books, academic journals, pamphlets, periodicals, and relevant online content from newspapers, magazines, and websites. The study examines the tangible progress made in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries concerning women's development and human rights, drawing upon insights from both primary and secondary data.

Women Empowerment

In the aftermath of September 11, the field of women's empowerment experienced significant advancements, accomplishments, and breakthroughs. Until the turn of the twentieth century, progress in this area lagged behind reforms in other sectors, including politics, education, media, culture, and the economy when the region faced profound challenges, with women disproportionately affected by systemic inequalities. Reformers and advocates for democracy recognized this reality and prioritized the emancipation and empowerment of women in the Gulf. Nearly every initiative funded or organized by the American government and civil society, whether in the United States, the Gulf States, or beyond, centered on issues of women's rights and empowerment.

By the end of 2008, women held cabinet positions in every Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nation except Saudi Arabia (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 73). However, in February 2009, Saudi Arabia appointed its first female minister, marking a significant milestone. The inclusion of female ministers in the Gulf began in 2003, shortly after the U.S. administration expressed its commitment to promoting democracy in the Middle East.

Moreover, women not only campaigned for and secured seats in the parliaments and local councils of most Gulf countries, but they were also appointed to these roles by their governments. This trend indicated that the ruling regimes were increasingly supportive of women's enhanced participation in the political arena (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 63).

Saudi Arabia

In the decade following September 11, the liberal-feminist movement began to gain traction in Saudi Arabia, with King Abdullah emerging as a supportive ally. Additionally, the establishment of the National Human Rights Association in 2004 saw the government actively encouraging women's participation (Hertog, 2006, p. 253). In December 2005, women were granted the right to vote and stand for election in the board elections of the Saudi National Agency for Engineers. Among the 71 candidates, one woman emerged victorious, securing a seat on the board (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2008, p. 166). In June 2004, two women were elected to the board of the Saudi Journalists' Association (Hertog, 2022, p. 247). Later, in November 2004, women in Saudi Arabia were granted the right to vote for the first time, enabling them to participate in the elections for the boards of the Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The following year, in 2005, women were also permitted to run for office in the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, resulting in the successful election of two women to the board (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 96).

Furthermore, the Saudi government removed several legal restrictions impacting women's civic and social lives. In 2008, the prohibition against men and women mingling in the workplace was lifted. The previous year, in 2007, bans preventing women from booking hotel rooms or renting homes independently were also abolished. In a notable development, Riyadh established a hotel exclusively for women in 2008 (Allam, 2009b; Freedom House, n.d.). During his time as Crown Prince, King Abdullah advocated for the right of Saudi women to drive (Zakaria, 2003, p. 120). This initiative received endorsement from the Saudi Foreign Minister in October 2007, who further emphasized that the demand for women to drive should be framed as a social issue rather than a political or religious one.

Women actively participated in the sessions of the National Dialogue, contributing to discussions that aimed at fostering reform. Additionally, initiatives were implemented to enhance the role and involvement of women in Saudi Arabia's business and economic spheres. Notably, King Abdullah broke new ground by taking businesswomen with him on his international trips for the first time in the nation's history. His encouragement enabled Saudi women to enter fields such as information technology and real estate, which had previously been inaccessible to them. In response to demands from female advocates, the Saudi Trade Ministry eliminated the requirement for a legal representative with power of attorney, thereby simplifying the process for women to enter the workforce (Allam, 2009a).

In response to the repeated invitations from the president of the Saudi Shura Council, women activists and educated women began attending the sessions. They seized the opportunity to engage in discussions about social issues affecting women with the members of the Council (Hamzawy, 2007). Furthermore, the deputy minister of urban and rural affairs, Prince Mansour bin Muteb, proposed granting Saudi women the right to vote as a means of enhancing their political rights. In February 2009, the king appointed Nora al-Fayez, an educationalist educated in the United States, as deputy minister in the Ministry of Education, specifically overseeing the girls' division, which had previously

been managed by religious leaders (“Tiptoeing towards Reform,” 2009). As far as holding cabinet-level offices goes, she was the first woman.

The Arab revolutions, alongside King Abdullah’s announcement of reforms that aimed to provide women with equal opportunities for political participation, significantly bolstered women’s activism in Saudi Arabia in 2011. While the primary objectives of Vision 2030 include diversifying the economy and reducing the nation’s dependence on oil, the initiative has also influenced women’s rights and empowerment. Legislative measures have been introduced to promote women’s involvement in both public and private spheres (Polok, 2024, p. 1).

The 2019 amendment to the male guardianship laws has enabled women to travel independently, provided protection against workplace discrimination, and increased their autonomy in marital matters. Each of these changes represents a significant victory for the advancement of women’s rights (Bilan, 2024, p. 9). Additionally, a royal decree in 2022, which introduced a new Personal Status Law, marked a notable step forward for women’s emancipation in the Kingdom (Polok, 2024, p. 11).

In Saudi Arabia, women have experienced significant advancements in the realm of education. This development has served as a crucial means for them to break free from isolation, offering a transformative opportunity to engage with a world previously inaccessible to their mothers’ generation (Salhi, 2024, p. 254). The Vision 2030 reforms acknowledge the importance of enhancing women’s access to education as a pathway to promote their economic inclusion within the country. Notably, in 2015, women enrolled in higher education institutions at a rate surpassing that of men, with over 50% of Saudi university graduates being women (Polok, 2024, p. 2). Additionally, in 2017, women were granted access to sporting stadiums for the first time.

In the history of Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 represents the most significant acknowledgment of the need to address economic challenges affecting women. The initiative aims to increase the proportion of women in the workforce from 22% to 30%. Substantial progress has already been made; for example, the percentage of women participating in the economy rose from 19.4% in 2017 to 30% in 2020. Furthermore, in 2018, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Commerce and Investment announced that women no longer needed permission from a male guardian to establish a business. In August 2019, the Kingdom implemented several amendments to the Travel Documents Law of 2000, allowing women to apply for passports and travel independently, without the need for approval from a male guardian. Additionally, in 2018, the prohibition against women driving was lifted in Saudi Arabia.

Bahrain

Bahrain signed the International Convention on Women’s Rights in 2002 (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā’īyah, 2008, pp. 46–47). A Bahraini woman chosen by the government became the first female chairperson of the UN General Assembly. Beginning in 2004, Bahrain appointed a series of female ministers. In April 2004, Noda Hafiz was named Minister of Health, marking her as the first female minister in the country. The following year, Fatima Al-Baluchi was appointed Minister of Social Affairs in 2005. Mai bint Mohammad Al-Khalifa was appointed Minister of Culture and Information in 2008 (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, pp. 63, 73).

In 2007, a woman was nominated to serve on the Civil Court in Bahrain for the first time in history. Additionally, the same year saw the appointment of a woman as vice-

chancellor of the University of Bahrain (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 63). By 2008, thirty-two women held director general positions within the Bahraini government, alongside five other high-ranking roles (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2008, pp. 46-47).

In 2006, a Bahraini woman made history by becoming the first to be elected to a parliamentary seat. In the legislative elections of October 2002, eight women participated, receiving considerable support from the wife of the monarch. That same year, women represented 52% of the electorate (Kapiszewski, 2006, pp. 112-113; Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2004). Additionally, thirty-four women ran for municipal office in 2002. In 2003, the king nominated six women for the Consultative Council, a number that increased to ten by 2006 (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2008, pp. 46-47).

The Bahraini government has also instituted policies designed to enhance women's civic engagement. In 2005, the king mandated the enactment of legislation prohibiting discrimination against women in any form. The Supreme Council for Women, with government support, assists non-governmental organizations focused on educating Bahraini women about their legal rights. Additionally, in 2005, the Bahraini parliament granted women the authority to sponsor their foreign partners and children (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2008, pp. 46-47). Currently, women occupy more than one-fifth of senior positions within media organizations. The enrollment of women in Bahraini universities and schools has surpassed that of men. Furthermore, the government allowed women and foreign residents with property rights to vote (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 110,112-113). The status of women in Bahrain has notably improved, marked by increased participation in the Shura Council, expanded political rights, and the country's ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 66; Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2008, p. 47).

Bahraini women from diverse backgrounds actively participated in both pro- and anti-government demonstrations and sit-ins alongside men during the Arab uprisings, which led to increased opportunities for their involvement in public life (Karolak, 2013, p. 49). The Supreme Council of Women (SCW) and female parliamentarians in Bahrain work closely to advance legislation that significantly benefits women. They successfully enacted Law 17 of 2015, which offers protections against domestic violence, while also addressing some of Bahrain's concerns regarding the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). During this period, efforts were also made to enhance women's representation in the Shura Council (upper house) (Shalaby & Marnicio, 2020, p. 327).

Kuwait

In 2005, Massouma al-Mubarak made history by becoming the first woman to hold the position of Minister of Planning and Administration Development in Kuwait. A graduate of the University of Denver, a private American institution, she has also worked as a lecturer in political science and as a columnist (Kapiszewski, 2006, p. 106). In 2008, Nouria Al-Subaih was appointed Minister of State for Housing Affairs (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 73). Additionally, Kuwait saw its first two female appointments to the Municipal Council, with Fouzia al-Bahr and Fatimah al-Sabah assuming their roles. Notably, prior to the appointment of the first female minister, the Kuwaiti parliament passed significant legislation that granted women the right to vote and run for office, thereby securing political rights for Kuwaiti women in May 2005.

In the 2006 Kuwaiti parliamentary elections, thirty-two women ran for office, followed by twenty-eight candidates in 2008, although none achieved success during those elections. However, May 2009 marked a significant milestone when four female candidates gained international attention by winning legislative seats. Salwa al Jassar, Aseel al Awadi, Rola Dashti, and Massouma Al-Mubarak, all graduates of American universities, exceeded the expectations of observers with their victories. Although the other female candidates did not win, they performed significantly better than in previous elections, with Thikra Rashidi receiving 6,600 votes. Female candidates in Kuwait and other Gulf nations have conducted their electoral campaigns with considerable professionalism. Given that women contribute to half of the country's economic activity, their role is vital to Kuwait's economy. Furthermore, women now outnumber men in education, comprising two-thirds of the student population in universities, while only one-third of students in higher education institutions are male (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 66).

In 2012, Rola Dashti was appointed minister of state, initially for planning and development and subsequently for National Assembly affairs. Although women's participation in politics has not significantly increased, the granting of suffrage to women and their emergence as candidates and parliamentarians, albeit in limited numbers, has transformed public perceptions of women's roles in the political sphere (Kaya, 2021, p. 23).

Law 12 of 2015 marked a significant institutional advancement for Kuwaiti women's civil rights in matters of marriage and divorce by establishing family courts for the first time in the country's modern history (Maktabi, 2020). By 2017, there were approximately 103 women's associations in Kuwait. In the National Assembly elections of 2009 and 2012, 16 and 24 female candidates ran, respectively. This limited representation may be attributed to the predominantly conservative nature of the community (Mohamed, 2020, p. 109).

Qatar

In May 2003, Sheikha Ahmad Al-Mahmoud made history by becoming the first female minister in Qatar, assuming leadership of the Ministry of Education. Shaikha Ghalia bint Mohammad Al-Thani was appointed Minister of Health in 2008, becoming the second woman to hold a ministerial position. Additionally, in 2003, Shaikha Abdulla al-Misnad was appointed president of Qatar University, a significant milestone. That same year also saw the historic appointment of a woman to the role of public prosecutor (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 73; Kapiszewski, 2006, pp. 118-119).

In the municipal elections of 2003, a woman won her seat unopposed, making her the first female official in Qatar. The election law enacted by the Shura Council in May 2008 conferred political rights upon women (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 42; Parolin, 2006, p. 81). Notably, women had already participated in the constitutional approval process in 2003, exercising their right to vote. Additionally, the establishment of the National Committee for Human Rights in 2003 included the appointment of a woman as a member (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2008, pp. 153-154). In 2007, three women ran for municipal office, and in 2008, Qatar University admitted female students for the first time in the fields of architecture, chemical engineering, and electrical engineering (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, pp. 70-71).

Supported by the Qatar National Vision 2030, 58.1% of Qatari women are currently engaged in the workforce. A notable example of this trend is Sheikha Hanadi bint Nasser Al Thani, a prominent entrepreneur who founded the Qatar Ladies Investment Company. Qatar has experienced a significant shift in societal attitudes, reflected in nearly universal

literacy rates and a strong representation of women in higher education, particularly at Qatar University. Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, the wife of a former Qatari emir, leads the Qatar Foundation, which has played a pivotal role in this transformation. Additionally, Hessa Sultan Al Jaber, a distinguished figure in Qatari society, served as Minister of Information and Communications Technology. Her achievements, alongside her Ph.D. in computer science, exemplify the progress of women in fields traditionally dominated by men.

Civil society organizations such as the Qatar Women's Association and the Qatar Women's Sports Committee actively promote women's rights and their participation in public life. The Doha International Family Institute engages in research and advocacy for progressive policies related to family matters. Aisha Alfardan, the vice chair of the Qatari Businesswomen Association, has been a prominent advocate for the rights of women entrepreneurs in Qatar. Although gradual reforms have been implemented regarding inheritance and family status legislation, specific cases often remain undisclosed due to privacy concerns (Zadeh, 2024). The story of Buthaina Al Ansari, a motivational speaker and senior human resources professional, exemplifies significant progress in the realm of women's empowerment within the corporate environment while remaining true to her cultural roots (Zadeh, 2024).

Oman

In March 2003, Oman took the significant step of appointing the first female minister in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a move that prompted the other five member states to follow suit. By 2005, five GCC nations had appointed women to ministerial positions. Aisha bint Khalfan was named the first female minister in Oman, assuming leadership of the National Authority for Industrial Craftsmanship in March 2003. Subsequently, in 2004, Rajiha bint Abdul Amir, Sharifa bint Khalfan, and Rawiyah bint Saud Al-Busaidiyah were appointed as ministers of Social Development, Tourism, and Higher Education, respectively (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, p. 73).

In 2003, the Businessmen's Council welcomed a female member to its board (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2008, p. 140). Furthermore, the Omani government appointed two women as ambassadors to the United States and the Netherlands. Women held 35 percent of positions in Oman's public service and 16 percent of seats in the Majlis al Dawlah, or State Council. In 2003, fifteen female candidates sought election, a number that increased to twenty in 2007. By 2006, sixteen women were serving on the Shura Council, while nine held positions on the State Council (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, pp. 63, 66, 74).

The significant increase in female voters in Oman in 2003, compared to 2000, indicates a growing political awareness among women. That year, approximately 100,000 women participated in the electoral process. In 2008, the state-supported Women's Association provided assistance to thirty-eight non-governmental organizations dedicated to enhancing the lives of Omani women (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2004, 2008, p. 140). Moreover, with the entry of women into the General Prosecution Office in 2004, Oman emerged as a leader among GCC countries in this regard. Notably, Farah Yahya Al-Numani made history as the first female firefighter in Oman (Kechichian, 2005, p. 90).

In the 1970s, only 2% of Omani women were literate. However, Oman's Vision 2040 has been instrumental in driving a remarkable transformation, leading to a literacy rate of 91% by 2015. Educational reforms have significantly increased the enrollment of women

in higher education, reaching nearly 50% by 2020. This advancement is exemplified by Rawya Saud Al Busaidi, who became the first female minister of higher education in Oman. Furthermore, Omani women have made substantial strides in the workforce, representing 46% of all employed individuals. Aisha Al-Kharusi exemplifies this progress, as she became CEO in 2019 within an industry traditionally dominated by men. Prior to this role, she served as a senior legal associate at the Oman Investment Authority, along with taking on other influential positions in both the public and private sectors.

Omani women have also taken leadership roles within civil society organizations, such as the Omani Women's Association. In 2018, they played a significant role in advancing legislation aimed at achieving gender equality (Zadeh, 2024). Key issues, including divorce and child custody, were addressed in a 2008 amendment to the Omani Personal Status Law, while a 2010 court ruling established new standards for more equitable divorce settlements. Thuraya Al Riyami, as the first elected female member of Oman's Majlis Al Shura, leads the committee focused on research and consultation. Additionally, the advancement of Omani women has positively impacted rural communities, marked by a significant departure from traditional practices when a village elected its first female leader in 2017 (Zadeh, 2024).

United Arab Emirates

In November 2004, Shaikha Lubna Al-Qasimi made history by becoming the first female minister in the United Arab Emirates, assuming leadership of the Ministry of Economy and Planning. Less than two years later, in February 2006, Maryam Al-Roumi was appointed as Minister of Social Affairs, marking the appointment of a second female minister. The progress continued in 2008 with the appointments of Maitha Al-Shamsi and Reem Ibrahim Al-Hashemi as Ministers of State when the number of female ministers in the UAE rose to four.

In July 2003, the foreign ministry appointed eight women as diplomats (Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah, 2008), marking a significant step towards gender representation in the field. By 2009, women comprised approximately 10% of the nation's diplomats. The Council of Ministers also appointed a woman to the position of Secretary General. Within the Federal National Council, nine women were among the forty members, and women chaired two of the eight standing committees. Furthermore, Emirati women began to engage actively in international organizations, including the Transitional Arab Parliament, the Union of Arab Parliaments, and the International Union of Parliaments (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, pp. 63, 71-72).

In 2004, the United Arab Emirates ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The UAE Businesswomen Council, established in 2002, serves as a professional network for women and has attracted nearly 12,000 members within a few years. Additionally, the Dubai Women Establishment (DWE) was founded in November 2006, further promoting the advancement of women in the region (UAE Embassy, n.d.).

In March 2008, Kuloud Ahmed Juoan Al-Dhaheri made history as the first female judge in the United Arab Emirates. That same year, Fatima Saeed Obaid Al-Awani became the country's first female registrar. The UAE also appointed Shaikha Najla Al Qasimi and Hassa Al Otaiba as its inaugural female ambassadors to Sweden and Spain, respectively. Additionally, in 2003, thirty-two women joined the elite security force, contributing to the statistic that women comprised thirty percent of the nation's public servants.

In the United Arab Emirates, women participated in elections for the first time in 2006. By December of that year, sixty-three candidates had registered for the Federal National Council elections. In 2007, the literacy rate among women reached an impressive 90%. Additionally, women comprised 18% of the faculty in higher education institutions. By 2008, women in the UAE managed approximately 4.5 billion dollars in wealth (*Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*, 2009, pp. 66, 70-71).

It is noteworthy that over 70% of university graduates in the United Arab Emirates are women, and the literacy rate for Emirati women is estimated at an impressive 95.8%. According to the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority, women constitute 46% of the workforce and, as of 2019, occupy 50% of the seats in the Federal National Council, representing the highest percentage of female parliamentary participation in the Arab world. In 2015, Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi made history as the first female minister in the UAE when she was appointed Minister of State for Tolerance. Additionally, Lana Zaki Nusseibeh serves as the UAE's ambassador. The UAE's "20 for 2020" campaign aimed to dismantle traditional gender stereotypes and to enhance the representation of women in engineering fields (Zadeh, 2024).

The United Arab Emirates stands out as the most successful nation in the region in enhancing the socio-political and economic status of women, as evidenced by improvements in family rights, employment opportunities, literacy rates, and access to education. Legal reforms, particularly amendments to the Personal Status Law, have advanced women's rights regarding divorce, child custody, and financial independence. Emirati women also play pivotal roles in civil society and philanthropy. Organizations such as the Abu Dhabi Businesswomen Council and the Dubai Women Establishment have the capacity to influence policies and societal attitudes (Zadeh, 2024).

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, American pressure to promote human rights in the Gulf region led to the implementation of various reforms. Similarly, the 2011 Arab uprisings raised concerns among Gulf monarchs, prompting them to adopt a combination of incentives and deterrents. This environment fostered further human rights reforms, which included significant advancements in women's rights, particularly regarding their access to business, employment, education, and travel. Notably, in December 2005, women were afforded the opportunity to vote and stand for election in the board elections of the Saudi National Agency for Engineers.

Bahrain ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2002, marking a significant step in its commitment to human rights. In March 2003, Oman made a notable advancement by appointing the first female minister within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Kuwait followed suit in 2005, when it appointed its first female minister. In Qatar, Sheikha Ahmad Al-Mahmoud assumed leadership of the Ministry of Education in May 2003, becoming the country's first female minister. Additionally, in July 2003, the foreign ministry of the United Arab Emirates appointed eight women as diplomats, reflecting a progressive shift in the region's approach to gender representation in leadership roles.

The Supreme Council of Women (SCW) and female parliamentarians in Bahrain work in close partnership to promote legislation that substantially benefits women. In Kuwait, Law 12 of 2015 established family courts for the first time in the nation's modern history, thereby institutionally reinforcing women's civil rights concerning marriage and divorce. In Saudi Arabia, an amendment to the Travel Documents Law of 2000 was enacted

in August 2019, allowing women to apply for passports and travel independently, without the consent of a male guardian.

In Qatar, gradual reforms have been made to inheritance and family status legislation. In Oman, the Personal Status Law was revised in 2008 to address critical issues such as child custody and divorce. Similarly, in the United Arab Emirates, legal reforms have enhanced women's rights concerning divorce, child custody, and financial independence through amendments to the Personal Status Law.

Recommendations

Women in the Gulf states, particularly those with foreign exposure and higher education, need to continue to push the boundaries for their rights and rightful liberties. In particular, those fortunate enough to hold important positions in public offices by election or government appointment bear a higher obligation to promote reforms aimed at improving the status of women in the social, economic, and political spheres. In addition, the world community has to contribute to the cause of women's empowerment and rights. The governments in charge of the Gulf states may acknowledge how crucial it is for women to be freed in order for them to contribute to both personal, societal and national advancement.

References

- Ali, S. T. (2019). *Perspectives of Five Kuwaiti Women in Leadership Roles: Feminism, Islam, and Politics*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Allam, A. (2009a, May 20). Saudi Arabia delays elections for two years. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/eb5f62a2-449f-11de-82d6-00144feabdc0>
- Allam, A. (2009b, May 21). Saudi women push for business equality. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/86cc066c-4632-11de-803f-00144feabdc0>
- Bilan, A. (2024). *State sponsored feminism in Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia* (International Relations Undergraduate Honors Theses, Boston University). Boston University. <http://open.bu.edu>
- Bronson, R. (2006). *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Freedom House. (n.d.). *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*. http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/section/174.pdf
- Gulf Yearbook 2008-2009*. (2009). Dubai: Gulf Research Center.
- Hamzawy. (2006). The Saudi Labyrinth: Evaluating the Current Political Opening. *Carnegie Papers*, 68.
- Hamzawy, A. (2007). *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2007/06/promoting-democracy-and-human-rights-in-the-middle-east-the-case-of-saudi-arabia?lang=en>
- Hertog, S. (2006). The New Corporatism in Saudi Arabia: Limits of Formal Politics. In A. Khalaf & G. Luciani (Eds.), *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*. Dubai: Gulf Research Center.
- Hertog, S. (2022, June 17). Reforming labour market and migration regulation in Gulf states. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2022/06/17/reforming-labour-market-and-migration-regulation-in-gulf-states/>
- Kapiszewski, A. (2006). Elections and Parliamentary Activity in the GCC States: Broadening Political Participation in the Gulf Monarchies. In A. Khalaf & G. Luciani (Eds.), *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf* (pp. 88–131). Dubai, United Arab Emirates: Gulf Research Center.
- Karolak, M. (2013). Bahraini women and the Arab Spring: Meeting the challenges of empowerment and emancipation. In M. Olimat (Ed.), *Arab Spring and Arab Women* (pp. 48–60). Routledge.
- Kaya, Z. N. (2021). *Women's Electoral Participation in Kuwait*. LSE Middle East Centre.
- Kechichian, J. A. (2005). *Political Participation and Stability in the Sultanate of Oman*. Dubai: Gulf Research Center.

- Maktabi, R. (2020). Institutional Legal Reform in Kuwait after 2011: The Paradoxes of Establishing Rule of Law amidst Authoritarian Upgrading. *Hawwa*, 182(2-3), 357-395. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15692086-12341382>
- Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah. (2004). *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: Annual Report*. Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies.
- Markaz Ibn Khaldūn lil-Dirāsāt al-Inmā'iyah. (2008). *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: Annual Report*. Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies.
- Mohamed, E. A. (2020). The impact of political reform on the stability of the state of Kuwait since 2010. *Journal of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences*, 2(2), 101-114.
- Parolin, G. P. (2006). Generations of Gulf Constitutions: Paths and Perspectives. In A. Khalaf & G. Luciani (Eds.), *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*. Dubai: Gulf Research Center.
- Polok, B. M. (2024). Empowering Women in Labor Market: A Comprehensive Analysis of Recent Legal Developments in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law Online*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22112987-20230064>
- Salhi, Z. S. (2024). Striving for autonomy and feminism: What possibilities for Saudi Women? *Diogenes*, 65, 251-263. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0392192124000087>
- Shalaby, M., & Marnicio, A. (2020). Women's Political Participation in Bahrain. In R. Stephan & M. M. Charrad (Eds.), *Women Rising: In and Beyond the Arab Spring* (pp. 321-329). NYU Press.
- Shalaby, M., & Moghadam, V. M. (Eds.). (2016). *Empowering Women After the Arab Spring*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tiptoeing towards Reform. (2009, February 19). *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2009/02/19/tiptoeing-towards-reform>
- UAE Embassy. (n.d.). *Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Portrait of Progress*, Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs. www.uae-embassy.org
- Zadeh, M. R. (2024). *The Status of Women's Rights in the Middle East*. Stimson. Stimson website: <https://www.stimson.org/2024/the-status-of-womens-rights-in-the-middle-east/>
- Zakaria, F. (2003). *The future of freedom: Illiberal democracy at home and abroad*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Zakariya, J. (2024). Female Activism, Tribalism, and Shame in the Arabian Gulf. In C.-H. Mayer & E. Vanderheiden (Eds.), *Shame and Gender in Transcultural Contexts* (pp. 139-158). Springer.