



# Women in the Gulf

An EGIC Investigative Series

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## Interview to Huda Alsahi

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The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC), while striving to develop a comprehensive outlook on the Arab Gulf region, is very interested in exploring the evolution of the political, economic and social lives, and roles, of women in the region. An expansive gender divide within many Arab Gulf states is evident and many root causes — mainly revolving around cultural and social traditions — have been identified in the voluptuous body of literature focused on gender studies. However, in the context of fundamental reforms unfolding in the Arab Gulf, it is also clear that ascribed roles of women ARE rapidly undergoing considerable alteration and women are increasingly seen as active citizens making major contributions to the political, economic and social wellbeing of their community and state. Significant differences do, of course, exist between each of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC). Some — re: Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain — have already undergone major reforms and have, for decades, had women appointed as Ministers of State and other representatives. Others — re: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait — there have long been more women than men in higher education and higher positions. Yet all the GCC states are scaling-up their efforts to create new spaces for their female citizens by confronting obstacles from within more conservative segments of society. The road is long but the GCC countries are definitively en route. This series of Women in the Gulf will keep track of such changes as they happen. Building on the direct testimonies of women from the Gulf countries, the EGIC is committed to publishing: interviews, analyses, commentaries, surveys and on-the-ground research about the ever-changing role of women in the GCC.

In this publication, we talk to Huda Alsahi. Huda, from Bahrain, is a third year PhD candidate in Political Science and Sociology at Scuola Normale Superiore in Italy. She was a visiting scholar at the department of Gender Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the winner of the 2017 Graduate Paper Prize from the Association for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies (AGAPS). Her research interests include the intersection of gender and politics in the Arab Gulf states and the political use of Information and Communication Technologies, and her current research project focuses on filling the gap in the contemporary scholarly work on social movements, cyberspace and women's activism in the Gulf region. Moreover, she has written

several articles about the status of gender in the Arab Gulf States, and gave talks in several academic conference and events including: the American Political Science Association, ECPR, BRISMES, among others.

***EGIC: First of all, thank you for your availability for the EGIC project. The first question would be what made you decide to focus your research on gender issues in the Arab Gulf states?***

You are more than welcome, and I am really glad to be part of the “Women in the Gulf” series. To answer your question, I have decided to focus on gender issues in the Arab Gulf States region because I found myself to be very passionate about this topic. It was also evident to me that previous scholarly work didn’t successfully uncover the cross-topic nature and socially embedded configurations of gender dynamics as a promising research opportunity.

I am deeply convinced that applying a gender-focused lens is crucial when it comes to understanding the existing generational and social dynamics that are embedded within the wider socio-cultural and political transformations that we are currently witnessing in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region, and to further comprehend how gender functions in today’s society.

***EGIC: You have previously written about the challenge of teaching gender studies in the Gulf. Can you tell us more about that?***

The field of gender studies in the Gulf region faces many challenges such as the lack of visibility and recognition. For example, it is evidently noticeable that the degree of institutionalization of gender studies in the higher education arena in the Gulf remains relatively low, where gender studies doesn’t exist as a separate department. Rather, it usually depends upon the sponsorship of a related department, which in most cases tends to be either the social sciences or the humanities department. Furthermore, among the, very few, ongoing gender/women’s studies programs, it is highly unlikely, if not improbable, to find gender-specific course or subfield offerings with a critical focus. Perhaps the most telling sign of the weak institutionalization of women’s and gender studies in the Universities is that the core curricula for undergraduate students has not yet been made gender-sensitive or at least not gender-biased.

Also, students are often not aware of the potential embedded within this field and how it facilitates the process of collective reflections. Instead there is an assumption, held by many, that gender studies leads to no tangible educational and employment benefits in the labour market, making it less attractive in the eyes of the students.

***EGIC: One of the themes you have been researching concerns citizenship rights for women in the Arab Gulf; why do you think this is a crucial theme?***

The right of women to equal citizenship is guaranteed by the majority of Arab constitutions, as well as by international law. Yet, these rights are not yet fully implemented. For instance, in some countries across the Gulf region, women are still not allowed to pass their nationality to their children and/or their non-national spouses. In my research, I focus on the case of Kuwait, one of the 27 states in the world where women cannot confer nationality to their children in the same manner as men can. This is something which creates many difficulties, as women need to obtain residency or work permits for their children, and are bound to renew them regularly.

Accordingly, adult children and non-Kuwaiti spouses of Kuwaiti women have no right to remain in Kuwait unless they receive valid residency permits that are issued from the state on the same basis as other expatriates seeking Kuwaiti residence. The politics underlying the policy has to do with the conception of citizenry on ethnic and tribal basis, stipulating that the identity of the state is to be linked to a particular ethnic group, that of 'original' Kuwaitis, ie. those who settled in the country prior to 1920.

Additionally, there is a key economic logic behind this exclusion: the inclusion of more inhabitants as part of the privileged citizenry is perceived with concern, given that holding citizenship in Kuwait, as in other GCC countries, entitles to welfare services such as health, education, housing, as well as employment opportunities. Therefore, more citizens may also equal a potential decrease, or deterioration, in economic privileges and financial support provided to existing citizens. This is a probable scenario, seen and feared by some Kuwaiti citizens and thus the reluctant support to reform the nationality among the population seems to be a result of the perceived loss of welfare entitlements. The reform of citizenship laws is thus directly linked to the strategic reform of the country's political economy, and becomes a puzzle in a much bigger and more complex picture, one that is key for the country's future. Due to these implications, I view the issue of women's citizenship rights as extremely relevant and I focus on tackling the efforts made by Kuwaiti organizations to draw attention to this contentious issue.

***EGIC: How are women mobilising to fight for more rights as citizens in the Arab Gulf? What has, so far, been the reaction from local governments?***

Women in the Gulf region have long mobilized for their rights. Take the case of Kuwait for example, a country which has a long history of an organized women's movement and broad-based associations formed around common interests or professional links, with different ideological outlooks. Since the 1960s, a number of different organizations have emerged in Kuwait, reflecting the country's political pluralism: those include both liberal organizations, such as the Kuwait Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) and the Arab Women's Development Society (AWDS), and Islamist organizations such as Bayader al- Salam.

The Women's Cultural and Social Society, has been directly involved in advocating for full citizenship rights for Kuwaiti women since the early 1990s. In 2014, it and launched an initiative "seeking out fairness for Kuwaiti women and their families", demanding the amendment of Article 2 in Amiri Decree 15/1959, or Kuwait's Nationality Law, to allow women to pass their nationality to their children on an equal basis with men, and the introduction of permanent residence for the foreign spouses and children of Kuwaiti women who choose to hold on to their original nationality. However, what was observed from the initiators of the campaign is the general reluctance and absence of serious political will on behalf of the legislators who have complained that women's issue do not fall within the top priorities of the National Assembly (i.e. Kuwait's Parliament). Indeed, those issues are often embraced by candidates only when the date of the parliamentary elections approaches. Also, citizenship policies have remained relatively ignored by the Kuwaiti government, perhaps for being too contentious. Interestingly, citizenship is at times gifted in rare occasions, such as during the Eid Al Adha celebrations, to a very limited number of individuals by a special Emiri decree.

Yet, this didn't stop the campaign from resuming its efforts while introducing new tactics to serve the cause, as it continued to attract new activists and civil society associations. More specifically

the committee of “Kuwaitis Without Borders”, a grassroots voluntarily committee formed by Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis in 2011, has later joined the campaign, trying to raise awareness about this issue through public lectures/seminars and social media-based campaigns. The committee also called for implementing comprehensive administrative reforms regarding this issue, such as advocating the adoption of the Saudi Arabian “point-system” which enables non-citizens to gather points for citizenship according to criteria that reflect personal affiliations to the state, such as birth, relationship with citizens, the overall skills and educational level.

As with regards to Bahrain, women’s rights activists and concerned organizations, including the Supreme Council for Women (the main government authority for women’s affairs) have, for instance, advocated and mobilised since 2003 for the adoption of the 2017 unified family law; stipulating that family disputes should be treated only according to the civil law, based on principles of absolute equality between genders. Also in 2017 Bahrain women’s rights groups, together with various Members of Parliament (MPs) and representatives of the business community, launched a petition named #MakeADifference that calls for the amendment of paragraph “A” under Article 4 of the 1963 Bahraini citizenship act, to guarantee citizenship rights for children born to Bahraini women irrespective of their father’s nationality.

***EGIC: More generally, what would you define as one major breakthrough or a major setback with regards to contemporary evolutions of women’s rights in Bahrain?***

I believe that Bahrain reached a new milestone in 2017 after the ratification of the unified family law that aims to improve the legal status of women when it comes to matters of marriage, child custody, inheritance, and divorce while reaffirming a uniform civil code in the country. This new law has come to life after a long battle and resistance from religious clerics who opposed the proposal and managed to mobilise people to express their resistance to the law back in 2005. In 2009, and after intense lobbying by the pro-women local NGOs, the government implemented the country’s first personal status law, however it was only applicable to the Sunni population. A comprehensive family law for both sects was finally ratified in 2017.

***EGIC: As a young scholar of Gulf studies based in Europe and a woman from the region, what do you think are the biggest misconceptions about Gulf women and academics?***

I believe that the biggest misconception about Khaleeji women is that they are seen as one homogeneous entity that is dominated, silenced and forced into submissive roles by their male counterparts. Also, I find the idea that women in this region “lack agency” to be widespread. By assuming my position as a young scholar from the Gulf region, I also aim to change these stereotypes. For example I organised a workshop last year in Kuwait University about the experiences of women who work in academia in the Gulf region to raise awareness on their contribution to the national development through their research and work.

***EGIC: Thank you so much for your precious time!***