in parties, and from women's sections of political and union organizations in which their specific demands as women had always been confined. It was a break with years of compromise and waiting.

In Tunisia, the first initiative of women's organizing was in the Tahar Haddad Club (1977-1987) which brought together political, union and intellectual activists who wanted to think outside the official ideology, autonomously, about the condition of women in a society in crisis. Tunisia experienced political Islam earlier than the other two Maghrebi countries (though strongly suppressed, it is still latent there). Because of this, the women's movement is partly structured by their will to defend women's achievements in regard to their juridical status, since the first demand of political Islam in Tunisia was to cancel these achievements.

This feminist autonomy constituted a rupture with the existing 'masculine feminism' represented by the authorities in place. It was also a break, as in the case of Morocco, with the leftist political and union organizations which were the ideological 'family' of Tunisian feminists, but which refused to take account of their specific demands and aspirations, perceiving feminism as 'out of place' and 'improper'.[22]

This period of self-discovery and attempts to group a plurality of expressions into a unique and autonomous movement was very rich in debates, seminars and publications, notably the magazine *Nissa'*. Two autonomous feminist organizations were created after the mid-1980s: l'Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates (ATFD) (licensed in 1989), and the l'Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Developpement (AFTURD) (formed in 1985, licensed in 1988). Within the Tunisian political context, these two associations increasingly positioned themselves towards more political claims, such as demands for democracy and respect for human rights. Both in Tunisia and Algeria, it was the women's movement that mobilized earliest and most strongly to defend their societies against the totalitarian threats emanating from political Islam, or the political regimes in place.

In Algeria, as in Morocco, it was mainly the PSC issue that mobilized women to stand up as organized groups in defense of their interests. Indeed, after several hesitations and aborted attempts destined to promulgate a PSC, notably in 1981, when it was withdrawn after the mobilization of women's organizations, this was finally established in 1984. In the words of one writer, "the Algerian authorities spent 22 years to put an end to shaky compromises, and return to the Shariaa, the time needed to wear down its opponents and exhaust women's resistance."[23] This event was extremely important, because it incited several feminist groups to reassemble, and to elaborate a common platform to demand the revision of the Code.

The Women's Movement Today

The struggles of the Maghrebi women's movement to reform personal status law had the merit of highlighting one of the paradoxes of modernity, which is that of trying to fix the status of women according to religion, while other social practices fell increasingly into religious confusion. Indeed, the long-lasting centrality of women's status was 'hollow' in the sense that their fate was discussed and decided in their absence.[24] This absence/presence started to be broken down by the emergence and reinforcement of the women's movement as a pressure group, starting from the mid-1980s, demanding change in laws, role and male/female relations.

In order to bring out the issue of the condition of women from the trap of private life, the Maghrebi women's movement transformed into a political and public issue the whole discussion about practices considered until then as trivial or related to private life, such as the juridical status of women, the sexual division of household labor, conjugal violence, etc.

The women's movement understood from the beginning that the 'private domain' had to be opened up, submitted to analysis, put into question and politicized. The struggle to reform personal status law and establish a family code based on more egalitarian conjugal and familial relations was as painful as resistance was lively. This resistance was supported, not by a stagnating traditionalism, as much as by the will to maintain the distinction between private space, ruled by Islamic law and proclaimed as sacred, and public space, ruled by secular laws and institutions.

Autonomous associations for equality between men and women constitute a new social and political phenomenon in the region's political arena. The history and current evolution of this movement vary according to their political and economic contexts, and according to the freedom of expression and association existing in each of the three countries.

Most non-governmental organizations in the region face several challenges to their work, due to the direct or indirect control of states over their activities, and to lack of resources, training and professionalism. Despite these difficulties, priority has been given by the women's movement as a body to the changing of laws, to the struggle against institutional, social and marital violence towards women, and for a more effective and free participation of women in building states that are democratic and respect women's human rights.

Conclusion: An Emerging Feminist Identity

As elsewhere feminist ideas in the Maghreb, because they are dangerous to the patriarchal order, are systematically demonized, rejected, ridiculed, or suspected of developing hatred towards men, traditions, values, religion, etc. This is probably the reason why some associations continue to describe their movement as 'feminine'. This defensive attitude appears clearly in the way certain activists are obliged to justify and explain what feminism is for them, and what it is in countries like theirs.

In fact, in all three countries, women's movements were described as 'feminine', from their formation in the '80s until the '90s. But today the tendency is fully to assume the feminist identity, which is not innate but chosen and claimed as a stance with a vision, as well as a discourse and practice. It is a way of seeing the world through the 'eyes of women's strategic interests', with a particular and open vision towards society, including its most deprived sectors. In this way, the issue of democracy is integrated in it as well as the social question in all its dimensions. Feminism is definitely perceived as political project. Traditional politics and the political arena are defined by this new, large conception that integrates all the dimensions of social intervention, because feminism's fundamental aspect is refusal of separation between politics and the social, the public and the private.

This feminist identity that transcends the national sphere to inscribe itself in an international identity is accused of being imported and foreign. But the feminists of the Maghreb know that they bring their own contribution to developing this universal identity in process of construction. They do this just as the feminists of Asia and Africa have done, whose contribution was decisive to reflection on the economic, on poverty, on the intersection of identities, and on other issues.

Living in societies more and more mobilized along cultural and religious lines, feminists of the Maghreb are often confronted with a dilemma: to choose between two identities, the universal one that is closer to their aspirations and their interests as women, and the 'Arab-Muslim' identity presented as being exclusive by conservative and extremist currents in a context of absence of freedom of expression. This identity is often experienced as an eternal warning about frontiers that cannot be crossed: that of religious precepts as defined by men, that of tradition and culture built upon sacred and unchangeable principles.[25]

These tensions explain why many feminists reclaim the specificity and diversity of Maghreb women's belonging, at the crossroads of many identities — Arab, Berber, Muslim, Maghrebi. Indeed their awareness of the use made by the Islamists of the concept of specificity to isolate women prompts them to emphasize the fact that this Maghreb specificity is not linked to the identity question but rather to the political context in which feminist action unfolds, ie. the absence of democracy, high levels of illiteracy, etc. Feminism is the same as elsewhere but, developed in a different context, its expression is necessarily slightly different. Feminism in the Maghreb is specific in the sense that feminists take hold of their history with their own reading, since the special character of feminist theory is to have demonstrated the lack of neutrality of analytical categories, which until then were held as obvious.[26]

The fragility of this emerging feminist identity comes to the surface during major political events, such as the first Gulf war. In a climate of over-heated Arab nationalism, it was difficult for them not to fall into the traps of nationalist, pan-Arab and communitarian injunctions, brandished as the cement of resistance facing imperialist ambitions by the Arab left, and threats against Muslim countries by conservative and Islamic currents. Not to rally to these positions is considered as treason. Several identities came into conflict between the partisan or nationalist positions and feminist positions.

Ever since the issue of women's status and condition has been posed, it was in terms of duality and of priority. The alternatives have always been set in the following way:

- The struggle against colonization required women to repress their aspirations while waiting for independence. This was supposed to solve all their problems and make men and women equal citizens;
- Once independence was gained, despite the involvement of many women in the liberation struggles, their aspirations had to cede priority to building the Nation. Their status on the other hand acquired a position of symbol: that of their country's attachment to the Arab-Muslim community;
- Eager to build a democratic nation, women joined parties of the left. But in this context too they were obliged to wait the coming of a socialist society in which the exploitation of man by man would be abolished, and by the same token men's and women's rights would be re-established. Women's claim of equality is judged to be the demand of a minority of bourgeois women. The example to follow was that of the socialist countries which had liberated women by liberating men;
- More recently, the request for equality was deferred

again under the pretext of social conservatism. This discourse presents the claim for equality as illegitimate because society is not ready for it yet. One has to change mentalities for the issue of equality to be accepted. The still high illiteracy of women, especially in Morocco and Algeria, is taken as pretext to dismiss women's claims. Under the pretext that the vast majority of women are illiterate, it is said that they need education more than rights, because they would not know what to do with them;
- Finally, with the rise of political Islam, women, always in the midst of such interrogations and tensions, are accused this time of weakening the struggle, defined as an existential priority, of political Islam.

The Maghrebi feminists' struggle against violence and discrimination, and to reform personal status and establish a family code based on more egalitarian marital and family relations, has been the more painful in that resistance is still strong. This is one of the paradoxes of modernity in the countries of the region, to want to fix the status of women in tradition and culture, while all other aspects of political and economic life are plunged in a confusion between religion and modernity.

Less than five decades after independence, these three Maghrebi countries have gone through major social upheavals, and are still today in a vortex of change, the rapidity and complexity of which prevent any certainty as to their future. But women in the Maghreb do not want to wait any longer. They needed several years to learn to develop independent survival strategies, to develop a clear and shared vision of the orientation to give their movement so as to maintain the issue of women's rights and equality on the public stage. Finally they have built an autonomous movement, and have the ambition to 'make time move faster' so that women's subordination will be acknowledged as a priority on the same level as development, democracy and social justice.

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14. Moulay Rchid, A., op.cit.
15. The constitutions of the Maghreb countries state the principle of equality of all citizens before the law.
16. Nadia Hijab, Laws, Regulation and Practices Impeding Women's Economic Participation in the MENA Region, xeroxed report submitted to the World Bank, April, 2001.
17. Tunisia has just abolished the duty of obedience, replacing it with the duty of mutual respect.
18. Judicial incapacity of the father, stateless father, unknown father, etc.
19. Except if the man is related to the children in a prohibited degree.
20. With the exception of the grandparents, who inherit equal shares.
21. If the deceased person has an only daughter, her share is half the inheritance; if he has more than one daughter, their share will amount to two thirds.
22. Zakia Daoud, op.cit.
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The Feminist Movement in the Gulf

Sabika Muhammad al-Najjar*
Translated from Arabic by Nadine al-Khoury

Introduction

The feminist movement in the Gulf appeared long after its Egyptian or Bilad al-Sham counterparts. This was due to the weight of social traditions, which denied women presence and participation in public life, and to the delay in starting girls' education compared to the education of boys. Gulf states did not begin educating girls until after the oil surge, which helped them set the pillars for modern states. The first state school for girls in Bahrain was inaugurated in 1938, over a quarter of a century after the inauguration of the first boys' school. It was not until the early '70s of the past century that girls' schools were inaugurated or spread in the Sultanate of Oman and some emirates on the Omani Coast (the United Arab Emirates today).

The beginnings of the feminist movement in the Gulf, particularly in Bahrain and Kuwait, were influenced by the cultural movement in Egypt and Bilad al-Sham, and by the writings of intellectuals who tackled women's issues such as Rifaat al-Tahtawi, Qasim Amin, and others. The movement was also influenced by the pioneers of the Arab feminist movement such as Hoda Sha'rawi. The '40s of the past century witnessed the emergence of some male and female writers who called upon women to participate in the Renaissance movement (*An-Nahda*), and for their emancipation from the constraints of obsolete traditions.

In this article, we will attempt to study the history of the feminist movement in the six Gulf Cooperation Council states, i.e. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

I. The Feminist Movement in Bahrain

Education played an important role in the emergence of the feminist movement, whose beginnings can be summarized as an increase in women's self-awareness, and their attempt to overcome the situation imposed upon them by traditions and customs. The press also played a major role in bringing new issues to the Gulf scene, for example the necessity to educate females, the call to unveil, and the opening to women of different work opportunities. On another level, professionals from other Arab countries, many of whom worked as teachers in girls schools, played a prominent and essential role in increasing women's awareness and encouraging them to create their own associations. Female teachers returning from abroad, who taught in al-Hadaya al-Khalifiya School for Girls (currently known as Khadija's Great School), founded the Help Orphans Association. Some daughters of rich families later joined this small group.

* *Member of Awal Women's Society and Secretary General of Bahrain Human Rights Society.*

In 1953, the Bahrain Women's Society was founded, presided over by the British Chancellor's wife, Lady Belgrave, with the help of relatively well educated upper-class women such as "Al-Fadila" Aysha Yatim (secretary), and Ms. Salwa Al-Omran (member of the Board). The Society was aimed at organizing charity events, helping the poor and the needy as well as teaching women skills such as cooking and sewing.[1] The Society was harshly criticized in certain newspapers and mosques as an abomination and a violation of traditions and custom. A group calling itself Call for Islam (*Al-Da'wa ila al-Islam*) issued a statement which included the following excerpt: "Boycott this abomination and declare an all-out war on its organizers, men and women alike. Kill it in its cradle before it sees the light, otherwise woe unto us all for it will be the end of us."[2]

On the political scene, this period witnessed the creation of the National Union Society, which led all national actions, particularly the 1945-1965 movement. Historians consider this society to be the first political party in the Gulf area.[3] Researchers link the beginning of the feminist movement to the emergence of the National Union, and particularly underline the two sisters Shahla and Badria Khalfan's role in urging women to participate in anti-colonial demonstrations, and the speech one of them made to a gathering of thousands of protestors in which she demanded that women be granted their rights, and called for their unveiling. This call struck a powerful chord among young educated men who began urging their wives to follow this woman's footsteps. Nonetheless, its influence was transient and came as a result of the political movement's influence at the time, as well as the support and enthusiasm expressed by women. The Khalfan sisters soon disappeared from the scene, and the national movement was also dealt a heavy blow, and its leaders placed under arrest.

The press took a special interest in women's rights, offering Arab and Bahraini writers the opportunity to write in its columns. In this regard, the late Aziza Al-Bassam says that the Lebanese writer Rose Ghorayeb wrote in the *Voice of Bahrain* magazine, and played a role in introducing several modern social opinions. The press also underlined the necessity for women to join the workforce and hold government posts. Some newspapers tackled the issue of unveiling, and demanded that women be granted their rights. This was also the period when the term 'feminist movement' was used for the first time, and there was a call to link the Bahraini feminist movement to similar feminist movements in the Arab nation and the world.[4]

In spite of this, the weight of traditions and custom was stronger than these calls, which were not properly used so that women could become part of the framework of a female advocacy movement. At the same time, the leaders of the national movement expressed their discontent with the Women's Society not only because societies were considered the preserve of men, but also because the Society was led by the wife of the British Chancellor, the symbol of British colonialism in Bahrain. Consequently, Abdul Rahman Al-Baker, one of the most prominent leaders of the 1945 – 1956 movement, called for the creation of a feminist association akin to those in Egypt and Bilad-El-Sham to replace the Bahrain Women's Society. Many merchants associated with the National Union were compelled to forbid their daughters to participate in the society.[5] The women in charge of the Society thought that the best way out of this predicament was to establish a women's charity, known as Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society, which opened in 1955, and became the first women's organization in the Gulf.[6]

Much as in Egypt and Bilad-El-Sham, where feminist movements were led by elite women able to acquire an education and be in contact with the outside world, the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society attracted mostly the educated daughters of big merchant families. For example the Society's president, Ms. Aysha Yatim, held a degree from a British university, while two other members had studied nursing in Iraq, and others had been taught in Bahrain by teachers from Lebanon and received a degree in primary education or its equivalent.

In 1960, the Child and Mothers' Welfare Society (*Jamiyiat Ri'ayat al-Tifl wal-'Umuma*), was founded.[7] During its inception phase, members belonged to the ruling family, and the families of rich merchants and high-ranking public servants. The two associations concentrated their efforts on charitable and social activities. The Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society opened the first-ever women's literacy class in Bahrain. Then the associations expanded their welfare services and inaugurated a kindergarten. The Child and Mothers' Welfare Society opened a center for handicapped children and a children's cultural center. In the '80s, the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society included girls who had gone to university outside Bahrain, mainly in Kuwait, Cairo, and Beirut. These young women had worked in students' movements and were influenced by the political movements of the period. Consequently, their membership had a great impact on the Society's orientation, and on its concern for women's rights and demands.

Although the Awal Women's Society (*Jam'iyyat A'wal al-Nisa'iyya*) (AWS), was founded following the June 1967 debacle, it was not officially registered until 1970, almost ten years after the registration of the Children and Mothers Welfare Society. Members of this Society belonged to the middle class and most of them were teachers or employees. Active in this Society were girls who had studied abroad and had participated in student activities and political movements. Some of them had taken part in national political organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, which conducted armed operations from the Zafar province in the Sultanate of Oman; the National Liberation Front, which is the Bahraini wing of the Communist Party; and the Socialist Arab Baath Party. The political background of the AWS's constituent body had the greatest impact on the Society's orientations, making it reject the kind of charitable and welfare work prevalent until then, and concentrate its efforts on advocating women's rights and demands.[8]

The same year, 1970, the Al-Rifa' Cultural and Charitable Society was founded. Its members were employees, particularly teachers. Its early orientations were somewhat similar to those of the AWS, particularly in regard to advocating women's rights as regard the personal status code, as well as political rights. Nonetheless, it was forced to shift to charity, particularly after the National Assembly was dissolved and the state security law was promulgated whereby every movement calling for women's rights was deemed political. In 1974, the Women's International Association was founded by women belonging to the richer merchant class, the wives of diplomats, managers and foreign businessmen.

Women Political Rights

As mentioned before, women in Bahrain were influenced by the 1945 -1956 movement, but their role was limited at that time. As mentioned before, they were also influenced by national movements in the Arab world. Clandestine organizations operating in Bahrain, connected to Arab or communist organizations, attempted to organize their female members, but they gave little attention to women's issues. Women were also influenced by the 1965 movement, which lasted in Bahrain for almost six months. Female students participated in demonstrations all over the country, giving them an opportunity to leave the confines of home and school, and call once again for the emancipation of women.[9] Bahraini instructors recently graduated from Arab universities played a significant role in this regard, steering female students towards politics, increasing their critical and progressive awareness.[10] Their role came to an end, however, after the 1965 movement was struck down. From then on they ceased to influence the feminist movement.

The AWS played a prominent role in asserting women's right to vote and run for office, aided by the Al-Rifa' Cultural and Charitable Society and the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society. They launched an awareness campaign amongst women to assert their political rights and, with the help of members of political pro-women movements, they organized seminars and meetings in clubs. They also sent a signed petition to the President of the National Assembly and the Emir. This petition was signed by most women's societies, with the exception of the Child and Mothers' Welfare Society. Emile Nakhleh believes that the latter's abstention was due to its members' family origins, for they stood to gain most from the status quo, hence were more understanding of the government's denial of women's political rights.[11]

At that time, in 1973 to be precise, the AWS, the Al-Rifa' Cultural and Charitable Society and the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society fought proposals by MPs from the religious bloc to stop mixed reunions in all public places (including work places), to stop women from teaching boys in elementary schools and kindergartens, and female nurses and physicians from treating male patients. The women's societies regarded this proposal as a "suspicious attempt aimed at undermining the citizen's personal freedoms, using women as a means to exploit slogans and outbidding."[12]

The short-lived National Assembly did not give women's societies the opportunity to develop their experience. With the dissolution of the National Assembly and the promulgation of the state security law, women's activism regressed, stifling the hope of creating an effective feminist movement. Nonetheless, we must note some shortcomings in women's activities at the time:

1. The societies' incapacity to communicate effectively with the mass of women in cities and villages.
2. Delay in taking action until only days before the promulgation of the election law which denied women their political rights.
3. Failure to address certain women who played a prominent role in women's activities, or to appeal to the country's most powerful leaders.
4. Failure to keep up action during the formation of the National Assembly at the same pace as when operating parallel to the Constituent Assembly, which drafted the Constitution.

The Rights of Working Women

Advocating working women's rights is an essential objective in the charters of the AWS and the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society (following the amendment of the Society's first constitution). Nonetheless, they failed to translate this objective into clear plans and strategies. Their actions were mainly an immediate reaction to prob-