women's resilience. This event was extremely important because it inspired 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 traditional status laws 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. 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 Maghreb 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 redefine personal status law and establish a family code based on more egalitarian conjugal and familial relations was as painful as resistance was lively. The distance that was supported, not respected in practice, brought to the fore the idea of secularization, 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 state's stances toward 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 political organization. The Maghreb feminists, in their formation in the '70s 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 not ascribable to women imported and foreign. But the feminists of the Maghreb know that they bring their own contribution to destabilizing this dualism in process of concrete action. 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.

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 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 authorites 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'.

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 in the mid-1980s: l'Association Tunisiennne des Femmes Democrates (ATFD) (licensed in 1985, licensed in 1988). Within the Tunisian political context, these two associations increased in defense of their interests. Indeed, after several hesitation and abortion attempts destined to promulgate a constitutional law, it was in terms of duality and of priority that the women's status was 'hollow' in the sense that their fate was discussed and decided in their absence. 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 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 hesitation and abortion 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 Sharia, the time needed to wear down its opponents and exhaust
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 discrimination, and to reform personal status and establish an existential priority, of political Islam.

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The movement was also influenced by the pioneers of the feminist movement, whose beginnings can be summarized as an increase in women’s self-awareness, and the opening to women of different work opportunities. 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-Hadya al-Khalifiya School for Girls (currently known as Khadija’s Great School), created the need for Oxfam Association. Some daughters of rich families later joined this small group.

The Feminist Movement in the Gulf

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-Hadya al-Khalifiya School for Girls (currently known as Khadija’s Great School), founded the Help Oxfam Association. Some daughters of rich families later joined this small group.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid.
4. Reformist Tahar Haddad published a book in 1930 entitled Notre femmes dans la Sharia et la société, in which he denounced the subservience of women, and called for renewed efforts to interpret the Qur’an (Haddad). This book has remained incontestably modern, an authoritative reference for the whole Maghribi feminist movement.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
15. The constitutions of the Maghreb countries state the principle of equality of all citizens before the law.
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.
23. Ibid.

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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 70’s that the past century that girls’ schools were inaugurated or spread in the Sultanate of Oman and some emirates on the Oman 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 Rifat 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-Hadya al-Khalifiya School for Girls (currently known as Khadija’s Great School), founded the Help Oxfam Association. Some daughters of rich families later joined this small group.

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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-Fadla” Aysa Yatim (secretary), and Members 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. 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-Qa’a wa al-Islam)’ issued a statement criticizing 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 all for it will be the end of you.”

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. Researchers link the beginning of the feminist movement to the emergence of the National Union, and particularly define the two sides Shaliha and Badia Khafan’s role in urging women to participate in anti-colonial demonstrations, and the speech one of them made to a gathering of thousands of protesters 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 classmates and outbidding.”

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, M. A. Aysa 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 (Jamiiyat Ri’ayat al-Tifl wal-Umuma), was founded. During its inception phase, members belonged to the ruling family, and the families of rich merchants and high-ranking public servants. As mentioned before, the movement was also influenced by the political movements of the Arab world. Clandestine organizations operating in Bahrain, including the Arab Liberation Front, which is the Bahraini wing of 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 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.

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 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 to associations and committees. As mentioned before, they were also influenced by national movements in the Arab world. Clandestine organizations operating in Bahrain, belonging to the rival religious blocs, 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 alleviate the confinements of home and social life. They demanded, among other things, for the equal political rights of both men and women. Bahrain instructors recently graduated from Arab universities played a significant role in this regard, steering female students towards politics, increasing their critical and progressive awareness. 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 several 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. 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.

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 to allow 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.”

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: 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 the charters of the AWS and the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society. 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-