

lems faced by women in the workplace, and had no follow-up.¹³

The Personal Status Code

Women's societies and other concerned organizations, as well as some individuals, multiplied their efforts for the passing of a personal status code. A Personal Status Committee was formed to launch awareness campaigns among women and in newspapers. These efforts failed until recently, when committees were formed to discuss the draft family law before it is submitted to the National Assembly. The Personal Status Committee did succeed in suspending the rule of obedience enacted by the police, and in restricting arbitrary divorce. Now divorce is only legal before a judge.¹⁴

Moreover, the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society and the AWS each established a center for legal and family consultancy, which constitutes a pioneering step in improving women's status. The Child and Mothers' Welfare Society also created a center for studies of women and children, which includes a specialized library. However this center still lacks specialized researchers and sufficient human and financial resources.

The Feminist Movement in Bahrain since the 1990s

Interacting with the events that took place between 1994 and 1999, the women's intellectual elite signed a petition to the Emir, Sheikh 'Issa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, calling upon him to answer the population's claims for democracy and the creation of a parliament. The government fought this movement and threatened the signatories with dismissal should they refuse to apologize and retract. Indeed, two women were dismissed, Hossa al-Khoumayri and the late Aziza al-Bassam, while Dr Mounira Fakhro, a professor at Bahrain University, was suspended from her duties, and not reinstated until after the political reforms of 2001.

Women also joined the Shi'ite opposition movement in the 1990s, and some of them were arrested and tortured in detention camps. One of them was killed; others were exiled. However, the movement's religious aspect and its restriction to one confession did not give way to a clearly defined female advocacy movement. On the contrary, the focus of attention was women's inferior status, and Shi'ite women were not regarded as partners in the national struggle but as subservient to Shi'ite men.

Following the political reforms of late 2000, including the return of the exiled, the freeing of political prisoners, and greater public freedoms, associations of all kinds - politi-

cal, social and religious - proliferated. Women joined the new political formations, but failed to recognize the necessity of asserting their own rights and issues, and to convince these groupings to put women's issues at the core of their concern. Add to this the turmoil of accelerating events, which prevented the associations from organizing their internal affairs, and setting their priorities.

At the same time, several women's branches of political associations were founded. Their work pattern was not any different from that of other women societies: visiting the elderly, and organizing seminars restricted to the female elite. Religiously-oriented women's societies or committees affiliated to religious associations enjoy a wider popular base; but they remain prisoners of the parent association, and cannot break free, particularly in issues such as gender equality, the unified personal status code for Sunnis and Shi'ites, and mixed gatherings.¹⁵

II. The Feminist Movement in Kuwait

The beginnings of the feminist movement in Kuwait date back to the 1940s when the education of girls spread in spite of constraints imposed by opposing conservative forces. In late 1948 some women writers emerged calling women to participate in public life. Some male figures also wrote articles supporting women's right to freedom. In 1953, a group of young women advocated unveiling, calling their meeting "The Conference on the Veil". This group gave rise to several supporting and opposing reactions, but its activities were restricted to meetings and newspaper articles. It did, nonetheless, incite women to consider founding their own societies, modeled after other Arab associations.¹⁶

Women's societies in Kuwait were founded years after the establishment of their counterparts in Bahrain. This was due to the absence of a powerful political movement in Kuwait and to economic prosperity, as well as the weight of custom which made women reluctant to take such a step or to remove the veil, even though returning graduates regarded it as oppressive and a symbol of the society's backwardness. This feeling was expressed by a woman writer: "In a country where people are still firmly attached to ancient traditions and where the older generation still watches every woman who moves to break the shackles of traditions... (t)his obstacle has such a great impact that it compels us to wait and ponder, once again, whether to remove the veil."¹⁷

In the early 1960s, returning women graduates attempted to create a women's association called the Kuwaiti Women's Society. Ms Lulwa Al-Qatami, a leading women's rights activist, says the Society's aim is "to organize efforts through a legal and social entity which can

achieve their [women's] aspirations in bringing about social and cultural changes that embrace Kuwaiti principles and values, favor the majority of the country's women, and can help empower them to play their proper role as citizens, mothers and wives."¹⁸

However, the authorities refused to allow them to work, due to traditions which opposed the idea of a women's society. The group consequently resubmitted its application to found a women's association under the name the Women's Cultural Social Society, which was officially registered on February 10, 1963. A few days before, on January 17, the *An-Nahda al-'Arabiyya al-Nisa'iyya* Society, which had changed its name to an-Nahda al-Ousariya Society, was given permission to operate.¹⁹

The Cultural Society focused on women's rights such as constitutional rights, and on raising women's awareness of their legitimate rights, while seeking to change statutory laws and social customs that violate women's rights. It did not neglect charitable work but this was not its main concern.²⁰ The objectives of the *An-Nahda al-'Usariyya* Society, on the other hand, were more general and included helping young Kuwaiti women by raising cultural and scientific awareness, advocating their rights, treating social problems, increasing awareness of the importance of families, and being informed about women's renaissance movements (*An-Nahda*) in the other Arab countries. Charitable work was not among its objectives due to Kuwait's higher income levels, and welfare services to the poor.

The two associations both provided social welfare and awareness services. They created kindergartens, launched cleanliness and health awareness campaigns in the rural areas of Kuwait, initiated literacy classes, and organized conferences and seminars to raise family and social awareness. Their charitable work was mainly outside Kuwait, and included building the Hanan Villages for orphans in Sudan, and supporting Arab efforts to liberate Palestine. The two associations also participated in Arab women's movement meetings, with *An-Nahda al-'Usariyya* Society representing Kuwait in the Arab Women's Federation. They also helped form a Women's Action Committee for the Gulf and the Peninsula, to create a regional women's network. However, the Committee's activities were restricted to holding conferences, and it came to an end following the Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis.

In 1974, the two societies tried to form a women's union to integrate Kuwaiti women's activities into a single framework and further their demands. But the Union was short-lived, dissolved by order of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in 1977, following the Cultural Society's withdrawal. Between 1981 and 1990, a period

which witnessed a surge of Muslim associations, two such societies were formed in Kuwait: the *Bayader al-Salam* Society and the Islamic Welfare Society. The Kuwaiti Women's Society for Voluntary Work was founded following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

The first two of these societies do not focus on women's political rights or their participation in parliament, but are mainly concerned with raising Islamic awareness, memorizing the Qur'an, organizing charitable work and crafts training for girls, and establishing kindergartens. The Kuwaiti Women's Society for Voluntary Work tries to raise women's awareness of the importance of voluntary work, care for children and mothers, charitable work, and to strengthen feelings of loyalty to the country.

In 1994, a new union was registered, the Kuwaiti Union of Women's Societies, led by the Crown Prince's wife, Sheikha Latifa. This Union included the three societies mentioned earlier, in addition to the *Nadi al-Fatat* Society. The *An-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya* Society did not join since it considered the Union a maneuver intended to weaken and restrain its movement. As might be expected from the member societies' orientations, the Union was not active on the feminist scene, restricting itself to coordination between the three member societies,²¹ resolving potential disagreements, and representing women in and outside Kuwait. The Union is supported by the Government but the Cultural Society's refusal to join it, and its disregard for women's claims, makes the Union just another society whose activities and orientations resemble those of its member societies.

Women's Political Rights in Kuwait

In lobbying for their political rights, particularly their right to vote and run for seats in the National Assembly, Kuwaiti women referred to article 29 of the Constitution which stipulates: "All people are equal in regard to human dignity. Under the law, all people have equal rights and duties; regardless of their sex, origin, language or religion." However, the election law restricted the right to participate in the National Assembly (*Majlis al-Umma*) to male citizens, thereby denying women three basic rights: the right to run for office, to vote and hold a cabinet position.²²

As Nuriya al-Sidani writes, Egyptian women's experience from the beginning of their struggle led by Hoda Sha'rawi was similar to that of Kuwaiti women: "Here in Kuwait, it is as if history is repeating itself after eight decades have gone by. The same means that were used then are used now in Kuwait...the historical moments that Kuwaiti society witnessed from 1973 till 1982 are the same as those that Egyptian society witnessed at the beginning of this

century, with the use of the same means, from the press to the parliament... Even when it comes to women's lobbies, they are the same as the Egyptians', since Egyptian women's journey also started with women's associations in 1924." This writer underlines the effect of the 1967 June debacle in making her reconsider the activities of Kuwaiti women's societies: "The shock of 1967 made me change my lifestyle and way of thinking. The path to adopt is not holding charitable events or exhibitions, clapping, and endless other stupidities... The first point in this new line of thinking is for Kuwaiti women's societies to throw off the shackles of charity." ²³

Four years after this statement, on December 15, 1971, a general women's conference was held in Kuwait, making it the first conference in the Gulf region to raise women's real demands. Issues pertaining to women's political and social rights were discussed, and following the conference a list of seven claims of women's full political rights as well as participation in public life and personal status demands were submitted to the National Assembly. Reading these demands makes it clear how poor Kuwaiti women's situation was at the time and how much it has improved since then, at least as to participation in public life. ²⁴ Women have become lawyers and businesswomen, and they can now enjoy a personal status code.

The women behind these demands may be criticized for not really pursuing them, in spite of intermittent attempts at organizing seminars or launching awareness campaigns about women's political rights among female university students. Such campaigns failed to reach the broad-based female population in their homes, or the districts where movements opposing women rights flourished.

In February 1977, a petition signed by 395 women was submitted to the Crown Prince. This document contained several demands including women's full political rights. But the National Assembly refused to concede these rights in its January 19, 1982 session, nearly nine years after receiving the demands of the women's conference mentioned above.

Nuriya al-Sidani believes that the women's societies failed to serve women's cause by not making a move before the National Assembly session. She summarizes the reasons for the failure as follows:

1. Lack of coordination between the women's societies.
2. The disintegration of the Kuwaiti feminist movement.
3. The non-involvement of the *An-Nahda Al-Ousariya* Society, one of the most important pillars in advocating women rights.
4. The limited experience of new societies such as *Nadi al-Fatat*.
5. The absence of proper planning that would have

enabled the societies to become influential lobbying groups.

6. The societies' failure to adopt a systematic strategy for women's actions.
7. The failure to exert pressure in crucial moments, and the absence of women from the January 19 session during which women political rights were discussed.
8. The frustration felt by the Arab nation in the 1970s and 1980s.
9. The domination of religious movements opposing women's rights on the Arab scene. ²⁵

Following the Kuwaiti crisis in 1990/1, and in the absence of the National Assembly, the Kuwaiti Crown Prince issued a royal decree granting women their political rights, in appreciation of their efforts in defending Kuwait during the occupation. The re-elected National Assembly, however, ruled that the decree was illegal, and by a simple majority rejected women's political rights. Even people known for their liberalism voted against women's rights in order to remain in the political arena. ²⁶

Women tried to organize themselves and operate as a lobby, while a few of the female elite tried to register their names in voter registration centers, or to resort to the Constitutional Court to obtain their political rights. But the latter ruled that this would be unconstitutional. This suggests that Kuwaiti women's struggle for the suffrage is a lengthy road that requires women to be patient and persevering. It also calls for them to concert their efforts to raise awareness among the broad-based female population, to attempt to win the support of moderate Muslim movements, and to coordinate and cooperate with all civil society's institutions to achieve their goals.

III. The Feminist Movement in the Other Gulf States

Except for Bahrain, Kuwait and to some extent the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there is no movement lobbying for women rights in the Gulf States. This is due to young state institutions in those countries, the delay in beginning to educate girls, the influence of the central government, and the absolute loyalty to the head of the state and the government.

Despite harsh constraints imposed by the social and political system on Saudi women, the latter are ahead of their counterparts in other Gulf States as they have founded women's societies, though these are mostly led by Saudi princesses, and their members are mainly the wives and daughters of the Kingdom's wealthier strata. The Women's Charitable Society was founded in Jeddah on February 28, 2002. Its main objective is charitable work, including aid to needy families, providing homes for the

handicapped, orphans, and the children of prisoners. The Society also tends to the welfare of children, mothers, and girls, and strives to educate girls through seminars and conferences. ²⁷

There are currently 19 women's charities throughout the Kingdom. These associations firmly adhere to the objectives stated above, to government regulations, and to social custom. Saudi women do, however, express their rejection of these constraints through literature and art. They are also active in the business sector but, in spite of their good education and high qualifications, they are still confined to 'women's professions'. Any female advocacy movement, however restrained, is firmly suppressed by the authorities and clerics. ²⁸ Although the Kingdom adhered to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, it had reservations about core items of the convention, and did not change women's legal status.

Women's associations are absent from Qatar, where women work through the Supreme Council of Family Affairs, presided over by the Crown Prince's wife. Founded by a royal decree in 1998 (no 35), the Council filled an institutional gap in the family development sector, and enhanced coordination between the ministries and various institutions concerned with social development. The Council groups a number of qualified Qatari females, particularly instructors from Qatar University. On March 5, 2000, the Committee of Women's Affairs was formed in order to handle women's rights and duties, to underline women's role in sustainable development, to ensure women's right to participate in leadership roles and decision-making positions, to enhance the role of civil society, and enable it to implement women-related programs. ²⁹

In spite of the recent nature of women's organizing in Qatar, Qatari women enjoy some support from the political leadership, as they have been granted the right to stand in elections, and to run for a seat in the central municipal council. Women's right to vote and run for office summarizes long, hard years spent trying to convince politicians of women's rights and competence to hold leadership positions, and participate in political life. ³⁰

Female candidates were greatly opposed by this conservative society, as their participation in elections was deemed too huge a leap for Qatari society to assimilate, particularly with ultra-conservative traditions that refuse changes that other Arab and Muslim societies have accepted, such as mixed gatherings and women drivers. Consequently, introducing social changes in favor of women requires the concerted efforts of conscientious men and women alike. It also requires "the elimination of

women's traditional psyche, as well as the social value system, and some of the social legacy", ³¹ not to mention the freeing of the creative forces in society and allowing the latter to form its civil organizations, providing for greater freedom of opinion and political diversity. The political leadership will not succeed in its work with the popular bases unless it is supported by a strong and efficient civil society that is truly free and democratic.

In the UAE, women's societies sprang up immediately after Independence, and the creation of the Union of the seven small emirates, the largest and richest of which is Abu Dhabi. Women's societies fulfilled the image and requirements of a modern state. They also fulfilled this young state's need to provide women with some welfare services such as education, vocational training, and raising awareness among families. Women's societies in the UAE have garnered such complete governmental endorsement that they have become akin to governmental institutions rather than NGOs. They are mostly presided over by the rulers' wives or relatives.

The *Nahdat al-Mar'a al-Zabaniya* Society (February 1973) was the first women's association in the UAE. Five others were formed which "followed the *An-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya* Society's footsteps in order to achieve their common goal of improving women's situation and status." ³²

In March 1975, the Women's Union composed of six societies was officially registered, led by the head of state's wife, Sheikha Fatima. This Union aims at improving Arab women's spiritual, social and cultural status, expanding women's activities to reach all the state's emirates, supporting the country's full national development, pursuing the establishment of good relations with other women's societies and unions in the Gulf and Arab region, and cooperating with international women associations. ³³ The activities of the Union and its member societies are mainly aimed at providing welfare services such as raising health awareness, raising religious awareness, carrying out charitable work, and vocational as well as crafts training for women.

Prior to the accession of Sultan Kabous, women's journey in the Sultanate of Oman differed from the rest of the Gulf. Omani women took part in the armed struggle led first by the Zafar Liberation Front, then by the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arab Gulf. The latter included women's issues in its program, but poverty, illiteracy and the conditions of political life prevented the achievement of this program. The Popular Front concentrated on eradicating women's illiteracy. Omanis owe the achievement of this goal to the Bahraini militant, Layla Abdullah Fakhro, a member of the Popular Front who ran schools for girls in the Zafar province, south of Oman.