

## Chapter Seven

# Women, Politics and the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Emerging Trends

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Emanating from tribal and nomadic antecedents with patriarchal and patrilineal socio-cultural patterns, the interests and aspirations of Arab women have primarily remained sidelined. In recent years, considerable transformations have taken place in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states as more women enter the workforce, participate in public life, and engage in political processes. However, many factors challenge the holistic empowerment of women, particularly in their attempts at political advocacy and leadership. This paper analyses the emerging trends in women's political participation and leadership in the GCC states. The author concludes that governmental policies and proactive laws have resulted in some influential women attaining political positions. However, this is largely a liberal façade to appease Western media and garner financial investments for regional economic and infrastructural development. Therefore, real transformation towards women's political leadership and participation at the grassroots level has remained slow and evasive.

*Keywords:* patriarchy, gender, arabian gulf, empowerment, leadership

### Introduction

Until the early 20th century, women in the Arabian Gulf region, despite its patriarchal societal norms, were known for their self-reliance, hard work and decision-making abilities, especially since most menfolk were away at sea for long periods, pursuing a livelihood through fishing, pearl diving or trading. However, with the discovery of oil in the region, these states emerged as major producers and exporters of fossil fuels, rendering them dependent on oil incomes and expatriate labour. This facilitated rapid industrial growth, infrastructural development, and a 'rags to riches' socio-economic transformation in the region. Oil development ended sea travel-related jobs for men, and wom-

en became relegated to comfortable private spaces, leading a life of self-indulgence as expatriate domestic helpers catered to all their needs. However, by the 21st century, the negative impacts of complete dependence on a single resource income became evident, and these states now seek to focus on economic diversification by branding themselves as business and tourism-friendly hubs for banking, logistics, and IT facilities that are attractive for foreign investments and collaboration. Many policy changes have been forthcoming in recent years, including 'state-sponsored feminism,' which encourages women to study and work, even as governments seek to nationalise the workforce and reduce dependence on expatriate labour. As a result, women in the region now have better access to education and career opportunities. Moreover, they are more aware of their personal rights, encouraging them to resist traditional patriarchal societal norms and clamour for political participation and leadership.

The Arabian Gulf region consists of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, including UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain. These states emerged from nomadic and tribal antecedents that determined their political structures. The GCC states have varying political systems; some have parliamentary institutions (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman) and written constitutions (Kuwait). However, none of them can be considered a liberal democracy in the Western sense, as executive powers are retained by a ruling dynastic head called 'Shaikh' or 'Emir,' and political power remains concentrated in the hands of ruling family members. Even as these states modernised with distinct civil, commercial, and penal codes, they have been unable to break free completely from Shariah-based norms that uphold the position of the father over children, husband over wife and family over the individual (Al-Ghanim, 2012). This supports the societal norm that women have the sole responsibility for childbearing and child-rearing as well as related duties and role expectations within domestic spheres. Further, the existence of male-based kinship structures and networks within society often reinforces informal and customary rules (Jayachandran, 2021) that sustain patriarchy, gender inequality, and women's subordination based on norms of patrilineal descent, patrifocal residence, and gender stratification (Charrad, 2011; Alwedinani, 2017). Thus, the notion of citizenship remains gendered as political processes tied women's rights and benefits to their roles as a wife or daughter, rendering them dependent and second-class citizens within their own coun-

try (Rizzo et al., 2002; Abbott, 2017). Traditional patriarchal structures, gender bias cultural norms, societal expectations, and religious interpretations prevalent in GCC societies remain barriers to women's political empowerment (Sayigh, 1981; Abdalla, 1996; Gharaibeh, 2015; Arar, 2019; Said-Foqahaa & Maziad, 2011).

### Key Factors Impacting Women's Political Participation

Gender roles and representations in the region have multiple, often contradictory contexts and complexities. Narratives on Arab women often negate their resourcefulness and agency in individual and collective capacities (Sukarieh, 2015), succumbing to stereotypical depictions as ostensibly 'traditional' and 'oppressed,' often veiled and restrained to the inner spaces of their homes. While women partake in decision-making within families, the intrinsic separation of family and polity renders them subordinate in public spheres, with political leadership largely viewed as a male bastion.

In recent decades, women's education throughout the GCC has become accessible and is no longer a prerogative of royal and elite women. Many female students seek university education; in most universities, female students outnumber and outperform male students (Ashour, 2020). Today, these states are seeking economic diversification by prioritising the employment of the local population (e.g. Kuwaitization, Bahrainisation, Emiratization, Omanization, Saudization, Qatarization). This process can only succeed when more females are employed within the Indigenous workforce than at present, as seen in Table 7.1. However, despite high female literacy levels in these states, social attitudes still prevent women from pursuing certain jobs. Many women prefer government jobs over the private sector due to better benefits, including favourable work hours and generous maternity leave.

Another critical factor is that within the GCC nations, ultimate political power rests exclusively with the Executive Head of state. This po-

TABLE 7.1 GCC Labour Force Participation by Gender in 2023

Gender	Kuwait	UAE	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	Bahrain
Male	85.9	93.1	88.4	96.6	79.9	87.1
Female	47.6	55.4	32.0	64.1	34.5	44.1

NOTES Based on data from World Bank Gender Data (<https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies>). In percent.

sition derives from royal hereditary leadership rather than an elected mandate. Representative political institutions include Shura advisory councils, consultative and appointed (e.g. Qatar, Saudi Arabia), and a few quasi-elected parliaments (e.g. Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, Oman).

Women in the region have been able to participate in political bodies mainly through state-sponsored feminism, which signifies the specification of gender-based quotas in institutions, the nomination of women to executive and ministerial positions, and advocacy for women-centric legislation. This approach strategically instrumentalises feminism for governmental legitimisation and stability, a practice often criticised as ‘gender washing.’ This concept lent some legitimacy to the limited representative institutions in these states and enabled them to counterbalance fundamentalist and conservative Islamist elements. Women political leaders in the region mainly came from royal or wealthy elite families. Political appointments were guided by close familial connections, perhaps because these appointments might be reluctant to challenge basic socio-political structures. Notable among them are Sheikha Lubna Bint Khalid Al Qasimi (Minister for Tolerance, UAE), Sheikha Mai Bint Mohammed Al Khalifa (Information Minister, Bahrain), and Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud (Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to USA). A few highly educated women from non-royal and non-influential families, particularly from urban metropolitan areas, have also emerged into leadership positions (Abdulkadir & Muller, 2019, p. 188). However, they remain marginalised and sidelined from influential political committees due to power dynamics and stereotyping within legislatures that use their lack of experience and expertise in political affairs as an excuse (Shalaby & Eliman, 2020). A few rare exceptions include the appointment in Kuwait of Masooma Mubarak in 2005 as the first female cabinet minister in the GCC, marking a significant deviation from the monopoly of royal women and the reservation of ‘soft roles’ and unimportant positions to women. Since then, although the presence of women in political roles in the region has increased, their inclusion has been slow and negligible, as seen in Table 7.2.

From the above, we can observe the limited presence of women in politics and the absence of women as head of state, speaker, or deputy speaker in the region in 2023. The number of women in cabinet positions remains marginal in most states and is non-existent in Saudi Arabia. Further, in the Upper or Single house of parliament (as appli-

TABLE 7.2 Women in Politics across the GCC in 2023

Item	Bahrain	Qatar	UAE	Oman	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia
Women Head of State/Speakers or Deputy Speakers	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil
Women Cabinet Ministers	5/23 (21.7)	3/16 (18.8)	3/17 (17.6)	3/20 (15.0)	2/15 (13.3)	0/23 (0.0)
Women in Parliament (Lower/Single House)	8/40 (20.0)	2/45 (4.4)	20/40 (50.0)	2/86 (2.3)	4/64 (6.3)	30/151 (19.9)
Women in Parliament (Upper House)	10/40 (25.0)	NA	NA	15/85 (17.7)	NA	NA

NOTES Based on data from UN Women (2023). Percentages in parentheses.

cable), the UAE is the only state with 50% representation, while Qatar and Oman have less than 5%.

While state feminism has been instrumental in advancing some capable women to leadership roles and showcasing them as model citizens, the common perception of women leaders continues to endorse sexist stereotypes. Arab regimes promote a particular ideal of behaviour, values, and dress that conforms to traditional boundaries of social morality and Islamic culture. This often exalts a woman's domestic role as mother, homemaker, and caregiver while endorsing the man as the primary breadwinner in the family, despite women contributing effectively to the family income (Al-Mutawa, 2020). Additionally, the daily lives of ordinary women in the GCC remain unaffected, as a large percentage still do not exercise their voting rights. State feminism thus impacts through few policy initiatives, but apart from symbolic representation, it has failed to address social structures and regressive practices that continue to marginalise women (Geha & Karam, 2021; El-Husseini, 2023). What is needed is more inclusive feminism that is driven from the grassroots level and not merely top-down token representation delineated by male politicians whose approach is mainly male-centric.

### Political Participation of Women in the GCC

In the GCC, despite considerable limitations, women's rights activists and civil society organisations have played a crucial role in advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment by raising awareness, mobilising support, and pushing for policy changes that benefit wom-

en in politics and other spheres of society. The Arab Spring revolts after 2010 also impacted the GCC region, but their manifestations varied in each country; some were more easily quelled, as in Kuwait and Oman, while others were more robust and violent, like in Bahrain. In Saudi Arabia, voices for reform of women's status came from Saudi women living abroad (Milmo, 2012), while in the Emirates, their cause was supported by reform by young political leaders (Abdullah, 2012). Although change is evident, it has remained limited to a few states more than others due to better policy-making and implementation.

Oman was the first in the region to grant women the right to vote in 1994; however, only in 2003 did two women enter the parliament. However, few women have entered politics (Al-Lamki, 2017) as tribalism and conservative ideological beliefs have hindered women's representation despite education and high income (Al Subhi & Smith, 2019). Nevertheless, the presence of women in politics is among the lowest in the region.

In Bahrain, women were first appointed to the Shura advisory council in 2000 and have participated in parliamentary elections since 2002, following a royal decree granting women full political rights. In 2010, Laitifa Al Qaoud became the first woman Member of Parliament. Since then, many women have been appointed to ministerial positions and other high-level governmental roles. The Bahraini government has implemented initiatives to promote women's political participation through awareness campaigns and capacity-building programs. However, constant crackdowns on political freedoms have impacted women candidates more, as they are excluded from influential Islamist parties and are forced to contest elections as independent candidates without any access to funding or political expertise.

Seeking to establish the image of a global society, the UAE has consistently tried to promote gender equality and women's empowerment and protect against gender discrimination. Since 2006, women have been able to vote and run for office in the Federal National Council (parliament). In 2015, a federal-level entity, the UAE Gender Balance Council, was established to reduce the gender gap. Amal Al Qubaisi was the first woman in the GCC to be elected as speaker of a national council. Further, in 2019, the UAE Cabinet approved a decision ensuring women's representation in the parliament, and women now make up about 50% of the membership. However, although some women have obtained positions within state institutions, they have not been

represented in local governments, suggesting that women's leadership is not yet accepted within society (Abdulkadir & Muller, 2020, p. 8; Levchenko, 2022).

In Kuwait, female participation had been on the modernisation agenda since the 1980s (Al Najar, 2000); however, Kuwaiti women gained the right to vote and run for office only in 2005. In the 2009 parliamentary elections, women participated as candidates for the first time and four women were elected to the National Assembly. Deeply gendered structural inequalities and sexism have created impediments to women carrying out election campaigns, inhibiting them from securing funding and building networks, as well as the hierarchies and privileges that derive from citizenship status and the socio-economic structures (Kaya, 2021). The present cabinet, albeit nominated, includes two women holding important portfolios: Noura Al Mashaan as Minister of Public Works and Municipality affairs and Amthal Al-Huwaila as Minister of Social Affairs and Labour.

In Qatar, women were enfranchised in 1999; however, only in 2003 were the first women appointed to the central, and Sheikha Ahmed A-Mahmoud became the first female Minister of Education. In 2017, four women were appointed to the Shura (Advisory) Council, marking a significant step towards women's participation in decision-making processes.

Of all the GCC states, Saudi Arabia has been perceived as a country where women are weak and inferior to men and often subject to many restrictions on their rights and freedoms. Until 1960, when the first school for girls was established, women were still confined to their homes, bound by traditional norms. However, by the early 1980s, young women were graduating from universities. Emanating from its status as the religious centre of the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia had a relatively stricter application of Shariah laws and practices, particularly relating to women. Saudi women struggled between ultra-conservative socio-cultural norms and value systems such as wearing the veil (Abaya) and gender segregation, which the country's Committee enforced for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Mutawa), a 'religious police of men.' By the 21st century, some changes emerged, as women were allowed to vote and run as candidates in municipal elections. Since 2013, Saudi Arabia has been the only country in the region with a 20% quota for women in the kingdom's Shura Council.

Since Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman assumed charge in 2017,

he has envisioned the nation as an economic and political powerhouse. He has unleashed more liberal reforms relating to women's empowerment, as stated in his Saudi Vision 2030. A core tenet of Vision 2030 has been the recognition that the full potential of its workforce can only be reached with the engagement of women, who form half its population. New reforms have enabled Saudi women to drive, attend sports events and concerts alongside men, and obtain passports without the approval of a male guardian. However, women still need the consent of their male guardians to enter into a valid marriage contract. However, conventional gender roles expect women to obey their husbands, and new laws fail to protect women from domestic violence, exploitation, and marital rape, which Saudi law does not criminalise. While these recent legislative reforms have created opportunities for women to engage more actively in political processes, progress has been disappointing and points to attitudinal and societal impediments to women's political participation.

### Challenges and Constraints

Despite many advancements, women in the region still face barriers to full political participation and leadership as they remain hindered by cultural norms, traditional gender roles, societal expectations, and institutional constraints. Progressive legislation promoting gender equality and empowering women in various fields, including politics, is being addressed. However, the implementation and enforcement of these laws still face obstacles, particularly from conservative voices that resist women's involvement in politics and call for an Islamic resurgence which emphasises faith and the utilisation of Islam as a political ideology. A review of the *Global Gender Gap Report (2023)* highlights the grave disparities and significant gaps in women's empowerment across the region (Table 7.3). The above indicates that the UAE has successfully reduced the gender gap, demonstrating how strategic state policies can enable a more inclusive and equitable society. In terms of economic participation of women, Kuwait scored the highest while Saudi Arabia and Qatar showed the lowest. Kuwait has the highest parity in education, and Oman has the lowest. Despite higher educational parity, Qatar indicated the lowest parity in women's health care, a strange anomaly as Qatar also has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world. Most nations indicated lower parity in political participation except for the UAE.



TABLE 7.3 Ranking of GCC states by Global Gender Gap (on a scale of 1–146)

Item	UAE	Bahrain	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Qatar	Oman
Overall ranking	71	113	120	131	133	139
Economic participation	128	122	118	130	132	135
Education	86	57	51	87	93	113
Health care/survival	119	136	87	114	143	129
Political participation	35	99	137	131	133	140

NOTES Based on data from World Economic Forum (2023).

Social and cultural stereotypes often portray women as being less capable and discourage them from pursuing political careers. The lack of political training, awareness, experience, and financial backing limits their opportunities in political spheres. A study in Kuwait concluded that women voters were largely influenced in their voting choices by their husbands, fathers, or brothers due to ignorance of political matters. This validates that understanding the mechanisms of the political and legal system, as well as knowledge of laws and women's issues, are necessary to enable women to exercise their franchise effectively and independently. A pioneering example is the 'Empower Kuwaiti Women in Politics' program, a year-long training program to prepare women to run for elected office and assist in their political campaigns.

Addressing factors supporting women's advancement in politics, Muller and Camia (2023) found that positive media portrayals, especially domestic news, play a crucial role in legitimising women's empowerment. Sectarianism, popular uprisings, and authoritarianism have also impacted women's position in electoral politics, as in the case of Bahrain (Karolak, 2021). Further, Dauletova et al. (2022) suggest that political awareness among citizens was a crucial intervention for changing public opinion in support of the political empowerment of women. Similarly, Lari et al. (2022) suggest that interventions through social awareness programs and education may improve the public's perceptions regarding the inclusion of women in power and their presence in political leadership roles.

Official and unofficial factors determine women's participation in politics. Official factors include governmental and legislative processes and policies; unofficial ones are evident in social and cultural norms. Narrow representations of Shariah law and conservative interpreta-

tions by religious bigots also have an impact. Society does not yet trust the political leadership of women. Women running for office are often exposed to sexist prejudices, criticism, and public defamation. Even women prefer male candidates and vote based on their husbands, fathers, or brothers' leanings. Additionally, patriarchal culture and tribalism are important factors restraining women. In many states, tribalism relates to the purchasing power of votes, and women do not have access to such resources. Male-dominated societies tend to marginalise women and restrain them to their private spaces. Thus, balancing public and political roles while consistently rising to familial demands as mothers, wives, and daughters limits the time and ability of women to engage in active public life.

### Conclusion

Although there has been consistent progress in women's political participation in the GCC region, the road to achieving full rights, equality, and adequate representation for political power remains elusive. Emerging trends in the GCC indicate that a few women are making their way into typically male-dominated political institutions. Apart from women from elite and royal families, there is greater activism among educated women, mainly from urban areas. However, women from tribal backgrounds, especially from rural areas, remain unrepresented. State feminism and state-sponsored initiatives are mainly responsible for the advent of women into political leadership. However, conservative mindsets still exist. Education and literacy are necessary steps to encourage women to gain knowledge and self-confidence. Nevertheless, political participation and leadership require developing skills and knowledge of political processes, activism, and governmental support through stringent policy reform and funding for organisations that promote women's rights and participation. Women's advocacy groups and civil society organisations advocate for gender equality and women's political empowerment in the GCC through awareness-raising campaigns. Additionally, these organisations provide support and resources for women entering politics. International organisations and donor agencies also contribute funding and technical assistance to promote gender inclusivity. Yet, these states have witnessed only cosmetic and superficial attempts at 'gender washing' in reaction to Western pressure and Western media reporting. This suggests that women's political empowerment in the region remains

largely symbolic, a façade aimed at increasing the national economy's international business competitiveness and development, making the nation's investment profile more attractive to normative powers.

Politics in the GCC is complex, characterised by an existential interplay between social mores, gender stereotypes, religious factionalism, tribal antecedents, and hierarchical hereditary executive leadership. These factors collectively resist more vibrant and inclusive political engagement. While governments grapple to appease diverse constituencies of their electorate, including tribal networks, religious fundamentalists, and the liberals, there is a crucial need for transformation in public perception of women and women-centric laws. Through greater political awareness as voters and candidates, women can make more informed decisions regarding political choices that most represent their interests. If the region, in its entirety, has to reach its full potential in terms of gender parity, women's political empowerment is fundamental. Bringing more women into political roles will present multiple perspectives on decision-making and help create and sustain a more just and equitable society for all. Further, to succeed, such change has to be on their terms within their cultural and religious identity and contexts and cannot be judged based on preconceived Western stereotypes. Continued advocacy, legislative reforms, and societal shifts are essential for further advancing women's political participation and leadership. This will facilitate more women-centric policymaking and focus on broader issues of human rights, social justice, and sustainable development, which can create more resilient and robust states in the region.

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